A Bend in the Future

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Acknowledgements

Dreaming stories was one way I enjoyed my early years. For years, I wanted to write some. I once had a novel started, although, I never finished and lost the story decade ago.

A tremendous thank you to all who offer help that often you never see the results of. Years later, even decades later, those you help, will remember the assistance you gave.

May this novel assist others on their search for hope and acceptance in world often not designed for them.

Chapter 1

The gate to the hen yard creaked. Chickens clucked and flapped around.

Tammy gathered the eggs out of the scattered hen's nests. With fifty hens, there were plenty of eggs daily. Tomorrow, they would mark a few eggs, and leave them behind to hatch. Scrambling baby chicks chasing their mothers across the yard always made her laugh.

Feathers scattered and filled the air with dust and straw.

If her brothers had turned the roosters lose to attack her, she'd roast them!

She grabbed the basket handle.

"Hello Tammy," Erin said. "Sorry to sneak up on you."

"Oh. It's you. I'll be in soon." There were a few more hen's nests to find.

"We aren't studying geography today."

"Your favorite topic. Why not?"

Erin never missed a chance to discuss geography, or perhaps it was geology. All those "geo" subjects were uncomprehendable. Studying simply didn't matter as much as living. And there was a lot of living to do.

"Genell called. We have to go help at Mare Valley."

"Be right there!" Tammy jumped up. The gate banged against a rock as she ran through. She bounded the steps to the porch. The screen door swung creakily as she shoved it aside to skid into the kitchen. Eggs rattled and banged into each other as she shoved the basket into the fridge. If any broke, Mom would yell at her.

Mom barely glanced up from reading the news. As always, ignoring her, unless it was important. She cared, without showing it. Anything they needed always appeared. Though now Tammy had to ask for needs and wants, unlike a few years before, when mom read her mind.

Tammy hugged her. "Thanks Mom. No books today. I am the luckiest girl in the world."

She mumbled something as she sipped coffee and read the morning news.

Tammy bounded up the stairs to the room she shared with Erin.

Turning to the right she felt for her headboard shelves. Her horse figure stood front and center, ready to gallop off the shelf across her pillow, and out the window.

Sheets and a thin raggedy blanket hung over the edges, obscuring her view. She pushed them aside to crawl under her bed, and pulled out her oldest jean shorts and muddiest shirt. Her tattered shoes flopped to one side under the foot of her bed. Her ragged tennis shoes had seen better days. Soon, she would have to buy a new pair for shopping, and relegate her tattered shopping shoes to around the house.

Across the room, Erin's neat and prim desk glinted in the sunlight. Her bed neatly made, pillow fluffed, and corners all tucked in.

Why anyone thought such horrid cleanliness would rub off on her, she could never guess. Lived in was far better.

She tossed the chores outfit at her chair. The stained shirt slid down and hung at a crazy angle. The multicolored shorts splattered with grass, egg shells, and runny white tumbled onto the hardwood floor. A mess to clean up later. Or leave it long enough, and Erin would clean it.

Tammy grabbed her riding crop. It knocked over the picture of her, Genell, and Lilly at the county fair last summer. She placed it back on the shelf, angled to look out the window, across to Mare Valley.

Time to go. The door slammed behind her. She slid down the stairs, and skidded to a stop in front of Erin at the front door.

"Calm down." Erin glared at her. "Aunt Sherry, sure you can help Mark and Joe today?"

"They won't be in for a while anyway." The screen more important than the two young women in front of her. "You may be back by then."

Tammy groaned. Hopefully, they would be next door all day long. Studies were too much to ask on such a beautiful spring day.

"I thought I'd take Tammy to the Jensen's later," Erin said.

"Good idea. I'll teach the boys today." Mom glanced at Erin and then sipped her coffee. "Have fun, and be careful."

Tammy danced. Adults could be so slow sometimes. They should simply make up their minds, and go for it, not waste time talking it out. She tapped her toes, and twisted the door knob.

"Oh go on." Erin tucked jackets in place on the rack by the door.

Tammy opened the door.

"Genell is in the mare barn. Lilly is having a tough time." Erin touched her shoulder.

Lilly was Genell's favorite mare. She wasn't even due to have her baby for another week.

Tammy raced out the door.

Genell had been distant lately.

Lilly's foal should makes things better.

Tammy would watch her grow, and train her since Genell would be in college next year. The foal would almost be hers. Especially if it bonded with her at birth. She slipped between the bars of the rail fence, and raced across the sunny pasture.

Recently bred mares nickered and ran away from her.

The birthing barn stood solemnly at the end of the lot. It was usually joyfully active. Today's silence felt dreadful. Mares usually foaled before sunup. If Lilly was having difficulty, Genell, and Pandy, the vet tech, would both be there.

Tammy crashed through the door from sunshine to darkness and silence. The aroma of fresh hay and manure was laced with the scent of sweat and fear.

Lilly's stall was number four on the right. The door was slid open. As if she wasn't there. Sunlight filtered from a tiny window down through the dust, to the empty straw bed.

Of course! She wouldn't be in her stall. She would be in one of the large birthing stalls at the end of the barn.

Erin bumped into her as she turned around. "Hurry."

Choco, Genell's border collie, whimpered and brushed against their legs.

Mares rarely had trouble giving birth, not like humans. It was life, not science, no matter what Erin said.

Tammy pushed ahead of Erin, and pulled the curtain to the birthing stall.

Three windows were open. Sunlight streamed down onto Genell.

Pandy sorted a pile of tools on the birthing barn kit cart.

Genell wiped her eyes and looked up. Her normally tanned face paler than Pandy's.

Lilly panted and heaved in a corner. Two feet of the foal were visible, though not the head.

"How long?" Tammy asked.

"Too long," Pandy said. "I can't help her. I tried. Miranda should be here any minute."

Tammy resisted the urge to run to Lilly. Lilly might not like the attention right now. "What happened?"

"Twins. Wrapped up together. I can't separate them."

"And I never checked." Miranda pulled a loaded wagon in behind her. "Tammy stay with Genell."

Miranda checked on Lilly. She tried to insert her arm to push the legs back, in and readjust the infants.

After a few fruitless minutes, Lilly struggled and screamed.

"I can try to save her, or maybe one of the foals. No guarantee." Miranda waited.

Genell nodded.

Miranda turned back to Lilly.

Choco rested his head in Genell's lap.

Lilly screamed and snorted as she tried to push the foals out of her body.

Tammy pushed forward and patted Lilly's head and neck.

Pandy and Miranda continued to try to adjust the Lilly's babies.

One foal's legs and head slid out.

Lilly gasped for breath.

"One more push," Miranda said.

Lilly took a deep breath and pushed.

"That's good Lilly." Pandy pulled gently. The foal slipped out and into her lap. Birthing fluid seeped into the deep straw bedding.

Lilly's eyes clouded. Her breath rattled. Her sides didn't heave. The second foal was still inside her belly.

Chapter 2

Tammy held Lilly's head. A tear slipped down her cheek.

The birthing stall was silent. Something that should never happen.

Sunlight flickered through the dust, drawing her eyes upward to a robin on the windowsill.

"She breathes!" Pandy rubbed to dry the foal.

The foal moved her head.

"Don't touch her!" Genell struggled to pull away from Erin and Choco. She shoved Tammy hard away from Lilly's head and buried her face in the dead horse's mane.

Tammy was stunned. They had always been best friends, and did everything together. She was even supposed to do her homeschooling summer job at the ranch, starting next week.

A hand landed on her shoulder. "Check the foal and let her grieve." Alden offered her his hand.

Creepy Alden, worse than her younger brothers. Tammy realized she was sprawled in an indecent way, and blushed. She struggled to rise while avoiding his out stretched hand, and his eyes.

"Don't let her near the foal, she'll kill it too!"

Tammy stared at Genell. What had happened? Genell had never yelled at her before.

"Sis, she didn't hurt Lilly," Alden said.

Genell gulped and pointed her finger at Tammy. "I saw her riding her three days ago. She knew not to ride her right now."

Tammy hadn't been at Mare Valley for three days. Kari and taken her to town for a weekend of fun.

Alden pulled Genell close. "That wasn't Tammy."

"It was. It had to be. She killed Lilly."

Alden glanced at Tammy before speaking. "Why would she kill the horse you share with her? She would have seen Lilly more in the next year than you."

"Maybe she doesn't want the responsibility," Genell said.

"I do too want her. And her baby." Tammy stamped her foot.

"There was nothing that could be done," Miranda said. "I doubt anyone riding her would have hurt her at this point, even if we knew

she was carrying twins. Meanwhile, we have the foal to think of. Alden, will you help Tammy? This foal is going to need a name, and a surrogate mother."

Alden nodded and passed his struggling sister to Erin.

Tammy turned to Pandy and touched the breathing foal. Blood and mucus still covered her legs.

"She will be okay, I think. Early birth though, and she needs milk fast. There are three mares we can try. Hurry. Take the sac with you." Pandy dropped the soaked cloth and leaned back in the mess of blood.

Alden gathered the foal in his arms and walked down the barn row.

Gross broken amniotic sac. Blood and fluid leaked out on the straw and chip floor.

Tammy grabbed it. The smell was one she wouldn't soon forget. It was different from the normal smell of an amniotic sac of other farm animals she knew. Even other horses. Something had been badly wrong with Lilly, and no one knew it.

"Rub it on the mare's nose before Alden goes in. Hurry." Pandy waved at her.

Alden stopped at stall six.

Tammy reached up and let the mare sniff the sac.

"Where is her foal today?"

"He is half weaned, thankfully. He can be fully weaned in a day or two if needed."

Alden moved the foal toward the mare. This baby wouldn't get any colostrum here. None of the germ protection that newborns needed.

The mare kicked and snorted. She backed away, and kicked a heel up in warning.

Alden sighed and carried the foal out. "Let's try mare three."

Tammy opened the gate to mare three's stall. Another boarded, bred, and foaled mare.

The mare stared back at her, with a frisky filly at her side. The filly jumped and moved, not allowing Tammy to enter. The foal could be killed in here, even if the mare accepted her. She backed out, and closed the gate.

Alden walked ahead to stall one.

This mare had lost a foal two days ago. She might already be dry. The last chance for this baby to be raised naturally. Perhaps at all. Horses had to have horse milk, surely? Cows wouldn't be the same.

Tammy took a deep breath and opened the stall door.

Mare one was on her side in the bedding. She didn't move as Tammy walked in.

Tammy reached her head and felt her neck.

At least the mare's heart was beating.

She held the amniotic sac to her nose.

The mare snorted, and raised her head, eyes flared.

Alden sat the foal down against the closed gate. He stepped forward and let the mare sniff his hands.

The mare snorted again and struggled to rise.

Tammy touched her mane, and led her to the tiny bundle by the door.

The mare nuzzled the foal. She whinnied, and pushed harder, licking the foal, pushing her into an almost upright position.

Tammy helped the foal up.

The mare turned for the foal to nurse.

Alden fed her some oats from his hand. "Is she getting any milk?"

Tammy tried to look without letting the foal fall down. "A chin dribble."

"Good. Let's hope she doesn't change her mind."

The door squeaked open.

"Tammy, when she is finished feeding, we will walk home," Erin said.

"Why don't you let her take the foal now, since you let her hold it," Genell screamed.

Erin closed the door.

Tammy's mouth gaped in shock from the day.

"She'll get over it," Alden said. "If not, I'll make it right."

Alden couldn't make it right. Genell had pulled away, to see her boyfriend more. It made no sense to Tammy. They had always agreed boys were messy, why bother with them. In the last year or so, Genell had found one she almost preferred to spend time with over her.

The foal stopped sucking, and Tammy let her go. She struggled and took a few steps.

Alden laughed.

When he realized she was watching, his face became grave, and he put his hand on her shoulder.

"Tammy, I like you a lot. Sis, is having a tough time lately. It's not just Lilly." He stepped back. "Guess what I am trying to say is, maybe it's best if you stay away a while, and let her recover. Maybe do your summer job somewhere else this year?"

"This, this is where I want to be. It's all I know."

Alden examined the top of the stall. "Genell is stepping out of her comfort zone in a few months. Maybe you can show her you can step out, and come home?"

Tammy reeled backwards.

Creepy Alden never pushed her away. Genell never pushed her away and didn't come back. Lilly had been her friend, and she had held her head as she died. She turned and fumbled with the stall door.

"I'll always be here if you need me." His voice faded away.

Tammy raced out of the stall and through the barn door. The run home was almost as blindly forgotten as the race to the barn had been.

She collapsed out of breath on the front steps.

The door closed.

Tammy didn't look up.

A glass of tea appeared beside her.

Her mother's feet followed as she sat down a few feet away and looked out into the yard.

"For you," she said.

Nothing else. She didn't even ask what had happened.

Chapter 3

"Genell, don't," Erin whispered.

Genell grasped the side of Lilly's empty stall. Her bridle swung in a slight breeze. A few wisps of hay fluttered down to the floor.

"Without her, what will I have?"

"You'll always have me, Alden, Corey, and Tammy. You've been so close for so long. Don't throw it away now." Erin pulled Genell close.

"Alden doesn't love you."

Erin closed her eyes. If Alden loved her, it would be so much simpler. He had to love one who didn't love him. And might never love him. "He'll always be the brother I never had. It's his choice. I'm the pesky older sister to everyone here."

She squared her shoulders, and looked Genell directly in the eyes. "As an older sister, I can only tell you so much. Please, don't say or do anything you'll regret later. Give it some time."

Genell pulled away and walked out of the barn. She strode to the fence nearest the house.

Erin followed.

"I have a week to decide. Then, it's too late." Genell faced Erin. "Without Lilly, what can my choice be?"

Erin pulled her close.

A tear slipped down Genell's cheek. "Tammy doesn't know about Bain. We always went somewhere private."

Secrets. Tammy's best friend should never have kept secrets from her. "Hush then. She might hear you, and you aren't in any condition to explain to her. Let's go to the house. Alden will watch her."

Genell struggled with the gate latch. "You sure that's wise?"

Erin laughed. "For now, yes. Let's go."

Erin wrapped her arm around Genell's waist and walked with her to the house.

Genell struggled up the stairs.

It wasn't just Lilly's death bothering her. Or that of the unborn foal.

Her mother bustled around the kitchen full of farm hands. "You have work to do. Don't put your chores aside for the death of an animal. Too many die here every year."

Genell pulled away from Erin and ran.

"Why did she run? I know the horse was hers and Tammy's. It's just an animal." She slapped a bowl of gravy in front of the hungry farm workers.

The men and women refused to look up at either of them.

"She'll be okay. Give her time. Tell her to call me if she needs anything," Erin said.

"As long as she does her chores. If she doesn't do them who will? Are you going to do her work when she goes off to college? I can't afford to hire anyone else." The woman wiped her hands on her apron and fanned herself.

"You'll have to find someone. I'm sorry." Erin glanced at the door to the interior, and then left the crowded kitchen.

Erin left Tammy alone with Alden in the barn.

Aunt Sherry wanted Tammy to have some unsupervised time, with caution. She didn't really know about Genell and Bain, though she suspected. At least Tammy wasn't with Genell right now.

Erin couldn't hover over her, seen, or unseen, at the moment.

The quick trip back to the only home she remembered was dreadful. How to tell Aunt Sherry? How much to say?

"Hey, my turn!" Joe said.

"No, mine!" Mark yelled.

The boys had a ginger calf they were leading, or rather was leading them, as they fought over her lead rope.

"Where are you taking her?"

The boys stopped in their tracks.

The calf didn't and dragged them several feet.

Erin smiled.

Mark let go of the rope and gave his brother a dirty look. "Mom said we could take her to Mare Valley to practice cleaning her for the state fair."

Erin raised her eyebrows. The boys had a perfectly good calf cleaning station at their own barn. "What else did she say?"

"Be good, stay out of trouble." Joe caught up to them.

"Oh, and find Corey. He's supposed to show us a new curry comb trick."

Erin ushered them down the trail, "Aunt Sherry already said it all. Don't bother Genell or Tammy please."

The boys grinned.

"As if." Mark jerked the lead from his brother.

Joe howled.

The calf shook her head until the bells jingled. She mooed and followed Mark.

Erin trudged ahead. Aunt Sherry would be waiting, and the news couldn't be good.

The front steps loomed ahead. Normally a restful, peaceful place to watch the squabbling siblings, much as she and Kari used to argue.

Aunt Sherry rocked and shelled peas. "Come sit beside me Erin."

Erin selected a porch pillow and sat beside Aunt Sherry. She stared at the wood grains on the floor. It would need to be refinished again this year.

Aunt Sherry's hand rested on her shoulder.

She looked up.

"Child, tell me."

"I'm not a child anymore Aunt Sherry."

Aunt Sherry rocked a few times.

The dog scratched its neck.

"No dear, you aren't. Can you pretend for a moment? I miss the days you came to me with all your problems. I know I can't solve them for you now. I can still listen."

Erin looked up to her. "Perhaps, you should ask your youngest daughter?"

Aunt Sherry grinned. "I messed her up didn't I? And yet, between you and Kari, I think she is growing into a good young woman. I don't have the patience with her you both do. She must be too much like me as a child."

"Or like my mother?"

Aunt Sherry rocked and covered her eyes. "Yes, the best and worst of us both."

Erin reached out to Aunt Sherry. "I'm sorry. What do you know, and what do you want to know?"

Aunt Sherry picked up a pea, and dropped it. "Renea's daughter, my oldest, and special adopted daughter, I want Tammy to have a chance. A future. What does she want?"

That was an easy answer. "Tammy wants to marry Corey, though she doesn't know it yet, and run Mare Valley."

A spark flashed in Aunt Sherry's eyes. "I want to pass my place to my daughter. It has been in the women's side of the family for generations."

"Ask Kari." Erin squeezed Aunt Sherry's hand.

Aunt Sherry looked away, as far as she could see. "No. She doesn't want the land. Other plans, and another lifestyle, are her choice."

Erin nodded. Kari had made other choices. "Have you two discussed it?"

"Many times."

Aunt Sherry turned to her, took her hands, and said, "I need you to help Tammy, one more time please. You only have a few months. Help her find herself. Then you can go to college if you want."

"I want to go. If I can come back."

"This will always be your home. At least, until you inherit another. I'd give it to you before a stranger."

Yapper, Mark and Joe's border collie, stood, stretched, and howled.

A car drove down the lane, tossing gravel to the side.

Erin had never answered Aunt Sherry's real question, and wouldn't now. There were too many things to think about.

"Can you handle a customer?"

Aunt Sherry nodded.

Erin walked through the door, flipping the intercom on. Anywhere in the house, she would hear what was said on the porch.

She climbed the stairs and entered the room she shared with Tammy.

The mess on Tammy's side made her sigh. It was time for her to grow up.

She could no longer be Tammy's maid. Erin grabbed her laptop and went to Kari's room to relax.

Chapter 4

Go away for the summer? Without Genell or Corey to tease and have fun with? The ranch was the only place to be in summer, working the horses. Corey always watched and helped from a distance.

Of course, getting away from her brothers might be nice. No late night arguments about science and genetics, as if they mattered. It was people that mattered, not the invisible bits no one could see.

Mrs. Jensen would know what to do. She always knew exactly what Tammy was trying to say or do, and cleared the barriers away when she fought with her mom over anything. Lately, Mrs. Jensen hadn't visited them much. They had to go see her. Odd clothes, the herbal, earthy odor was familiar, although different somehow, from her mom and Erin.

The rambling mansion needed lots of work. Woods crowded up against the house and shed, shading the herb garden. Heavy drapes hung from the windows, blocking the sunlight out. Worn floor boards creaked and groaned when walked on. Dust covered furniture filled unused empty wings from previous generations. A few weeks of scrubbing and a couple coats of paint should fix the inside.

Erin walked ahead of her, not speaking.

Something about her silence was different than normal, or maybe it was her imagination. Erin was almost as odd as old Mrs. Jensen these days.

Tammy jumped when the gate squeaked open.

Erin kept going, right through the trailing vegetation, up onto the aged, shadowy porch. She knocked on the double tall, double wide, wooden door.

Shuffling footsteps echoed.

The door creaked open.

"Hello girls. Come in, come in," Mrs. Jensen said.

Tammy took a gulp of the semi stale air. She followed Erin into the cozy kitchen.

The smell of fried zucchini wafted through the stings of herbs, spices, and vegetables hanging from the ceiling. Mrs. Jensen always knew when she needed comfort food.

The front door squeaked shut. "Mint, cammy, or honey lemon?" Mrs. Jensen said.

String after string of drying herbs roasted by the fireplace.

Tammy could pick one tea flavor, of the likely dozen or more Mrs. Jensen knew how to make.

"Chamomile for me please." Erin sat at the table.

"Me too." A little peace might be what she needed. Chamomile tea could do that.

Mrs. Jensen nodded and shuffled across the room, choosing a sprig of leaves from one of the many bundles.

"Add a touch of mint?"

Tammy nodded.

Zucchini sizzled in the pan beside the fire. Another pan of water boiled gently nearby. Odd as this place was, it felt almost like a second home. One that needed a little work.

"Erin, could you bring the pan to the table please?" Mrs. Jensen held the spatula in her hand.

Erin shuffled out of her chair to get the pan.

Mrs. Jensen had never asked for help before. She had always insisted she wanted to keep doing what she could for as long as she could.

Tammy jumped up. "Is there anything I can do?"

"There is a book on the hallway table. You may bring it to my seat."

Oh no. More stories of her past, and the history of the Jensen home and family. If only she had kept her mouth shut. She trudged out to get the book. On top of the heavy photo album was an envelope. That probably wasn't supposed to come to. Then again, it could be important. The unreadable address was handwritten.

She carried them to Mrs. Jensen's seat. Then she sat at the table ready for tea and zucchini.

Mrs. Jensen fingered the letter.

Erin stared at her, and nodded.

Tammy savored the taste of the food, waiting on the tea to steep.

"Tammy, Erin has a letter here. Would you like to hear a story?"

Anything if it didn't involve a repeat of the stories she'd heard a thousand times. She nodded; her mouth too full to speak.

Mrs. Jensen handed the letter to Erin.

Always prepared for anything, Erin pulled a letter opener out of her pocket.

Her face turned pale as she read.

Tammy waited. The story would start soon.

Erin handed the sheet to Mrs. Jensen.

Mrs. Jensen waved it back. "My eyes won't let me see the writing anymore."

Erin closed her eyes, and held the page. "My father and his new wife and children will be coming for a visit. He wants to know if they are welcome here."

"How sweet. He wants to see you after abandoning you long ago. No." Mrs. Jensen shook her head. "We agreed he could send you letters here. He may not bring her here. If he had asked before."

"Did you ever forgive him?"

Mrs. Jensen closed her eyes. "Yes dear. I forgave him. You look so like your mother, I understood. I don't want him to see our home like this. You deserve better."

Tammy gasped. This was all new to her. Erin had never mentioned contact with her father before. What other secrets did she have? Mrs. Jensen had always seemed so open, she must be full of secrets too. Maybe she could ask the question burning in her mind.

"Can I ask."

"Grandmother, I really want to meet them."

Tammy's mind reeled at Erin's words. The zucchini fell out of her mouth onto the plate.

"Tammy close your mouth and chew properly," Erin said.

"Why haven't I heard all this before?"

Erin laughed. "It was decided we wouldn't burden you as a child, many years ago. Then, I guess we forgot you didn't know."

"Now you know," Mrs. Jensen said.

"Erin, why didn't you tell me?" She slammed the fork on the table and clapped her hand over her mouth. That certainly wasn't the way to get Mrs. Jensen on her side.

Mrs. Jensen's eyes flickered. "Tammy, let's discuss Erin right now."

After the argument with Genell and Lilly's death, Tammy really didn't want to think about Erin and her untold stories.

"Tammy, are you listening?" Erin asked.

"Sure, just thinking."

"You spend too much time alone. Too much thought at too young an age can lead you to be an introvert. No place for hermits like me in modern society," Mrs. Jensen said.

"Will I ever be one?"

"Which? An introvert, or a hermit?" Mrs. Jensen laughed.

Tammy looked from Mrs. Jensen to Erin, not sure what to say. She took a bite of zucchini.

"What do you know about cooking?" Mrs. Jensen asked.

Erin stood up and walked out of the room.

Tammy watched her go, almost wanting to follow. She turned back. "What Erin has taught me."

"You need to learn to cook no matter where you go in life. Come back in a day or two and we will start. Now, help me with the dishes."

Tammy grabbed her full tea cup. She took a sip, realized it was cold, and gulped it. Somehow, this visit had not been as calm as she had expected. Everything seemed to go wrong today.

Washing the dishes with Mrs. Jensen was normal. Except for Erin not being there to dry them. They never mentioned her, Genell, or horses, which meant they had to talk about things they never discussed, like the names of the herbs drying, dishes, and Tammy's plans. Somehow, her mind wasn't on the work, or the conversation.

No telling what gibberish she had said to Mrs. Jensen. The gate creaked shut behind her. She walked the windy path home alone without Erin by her side. The farm stretched out in front of her. The cow herd sheltered just beyond those bushes.

Tammy glanced the other way. The top of the mare barn on Genell's farm peeked through the trees. Normally, it made her heart soar. Today, it hurt. The pain felt like a lump in her chest, one stranger and harder than she had ever known.

She hurried to the cow fence. Twenty cows grazed in the pasture. They shared a bull with the next three farms, and he was visiting one of them this month. These cows were their primary source of meat. They always sold a few of the herd each year for profit.

Choco pushed his nose against her leg.

Tammy reached down to pet him. He rarely came to visit without Genell. She turned around, hoping Genell would be there.

"Hi," Corey said.

Tammy's heart fluttered.

"Came to see how you were, and Erin told me you might be here."

Tammy nodded.

"Can you come see the foal a few minutes tomorrow? Be early. Alden wants you to help."

Tammy nodded again. She never could seem to find words to say to him for some reason. She patted Choco's head, looked up, and Corey was gone. Choco barked once and raced off after him.

She sighed. Maybe her horses would cheer her up. They weren't Lilly. They were old, retired, and some barely able to walk. They might be all she would ever have now that Genell had changed.

The fence row led to the horse field. A few horses stopped grazing and followed her, hoping for a treat. Her hands were empty. She couldn't even feed them. Tears welled up, and she ran on to the house. Too much was happening.

Tammy slammed the door and raced upstairs to her room over an uproar from her brothers. Her room door bounced on its hinges.

She fell flat on the bed without looking up. She pounded the bed with her fists. Willing the tears to come. Begging the tears to come. Her stuffed horse slid under her pounding fists. Tammy gulped and snuggled it close. Salty tears trickled down her cheeks as she gulped for air.

Chapter 5

Sometimes grandmother can be so cruel. Erin jerked the water swelled front door closed. Not even a satisfying bang.

The porch and home that would be hers someday, and likely soon. Grandmother didn't look good. Pale face, hands shaking as she held the spatula. Always before, she insisted on doing things on her own.

A broken bowl near the fireplace meant she had had another weak spell. No one, not even grandfather when he lived, dared offer help to this stubborn woman.

Erin lifted her eyes to look at the land.

Not much would change here until grandmother died. She wouldn't allow anyone to do things unless she was sure they would be done her way. Grandmother would rather let the place fall down around her ears, than let her own granddaughter live with her, and fix the place up. If she didn't do something soon, there'd be no place left to inherit.

It wasn't that she wanted the inheritance. She wanted to be a part of her grandmother's life. To be there, to help her. Even though her father was a thousand miles away, she was almost as close to him as her grandmother next door.

The gate creaked closed behind her.

Somehow, she'd find a way. The mystery novel from last night had a few clues for sneaking into gardens with good intentions. If only grandmother's hearing were as bad as grandfather's had been, she'd sneak in at night and do little repairs.

The house she lived in with Aunt Sherry stood before her, staring at her, as if it could read her mind and rebuke her. If the old woman who won't own a phone wants her house to tumble down around her, let her, it seemed to say.

"I won't let her die that way," Erin said.

"Who?"

Erin turned to see Joe beside her.

It was spooky how those pesky young brothers could show up unexpected. "Repeating something I shouldn't. Where is your brother and the calf?" How much did those two boys know, that she

never said aloud? She'd been spending too much time with Tammy, and that wild side coming from Genell was beginning to affect her.

"At the barn," Joe said.

"I think you'd better go find him and then weed the green beans. They need it."

"Okay," Joe said. "Water cans and work gloves, no books!"

He ran back the way she had come.

Not good, they were supposed to read this afternoon. They were young. Exercise might be better for them today anyway. They'd not hear the stress and pain in her voice.

She banged into the kitchen.

Aunt Sherry sat at the table. She closed her laptop.

"Why is your face red?"

Erin sat down. "I can't tell you everything. Not right now."

"What can you say?"

Erin picked up a napkin, folded it, and unfolded it. "Aunt Sherry. I want to ask Kari to take Tammy for a few days. I need your help."

"What's wrong?" Sherry leaned close to Erin.

"It's Genell, she doesn't want Tammy to know. She has to come stay here a day or two. I need the car tomorrow. I'll be careful."

Aunt Sherry leaned back. "I was worried. You sure she won't change her mind after today?"

Erin looked up at Aunt Sherry. "I don't think so. Bain left her. Her mom doesn't know. She doesn't have much time. This may make it worse. She will grieve, and fear telling Tammy."

Aunt Sherry sighed. "Those two used to be inseparable. Are you sure Tammy doesn't know?"

"Sure. And now is not the time for her to find out. She found out Mrs. Jensen is my grandmother."

Aunt Sherry laughed. "About time. You're right. It's too much all at once. Genell is not known for gentle words when upset."

"One reason we all like her," Erin said. "I'll call Kari."

The front door slammed hard.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs.

The bedroom door slammed.

Erin winced. "Will my room survive her anger?"

Aunt Sherry stood up and carried her tea cup to the sink. "I'll take the boys out."

She turned to face Erin. "I hope I didn't keep too much of your childhood from you. Is she feeling all your and her frustrations?"

"She's strong. Perhaps, losing her friend and the horse they shared at the same time is best. If Lilly had survived, the next few days would be a lot tougher. There is no telling what Genell would have done."

Joe and Mark slammed in the back door, covered in dirt and weeds.

Erin placed the napkin in the holder. "Boys, go clean up quietly. No noise, and come right back down."

Joe ran ahead and up the stairs.

"What's for dinner?" Mark said.

"Always thinking with your stomach!" Erin said.

"I have to plan for my stomach, or it hurts."

"Oh go on with you." Aunt Sherry flicked a dish towel in his direction.

"We'll vote in five minutes. Be back down here."

Mark made it almost to the stairs. "What about Tammy?"

Erin took a deep breath and glanced at Aunt Sherry.

Aunt Sherry put her finger to her mouth and said, "Be quiet, no sound. She is staying here with Erin."

Mark grinned and tiptoed up stairs, trying to be quiet. Once he reached the hall, he broke into a run, shaking the floor.

"At least he tries. He'll keep Joe calmer than usual," Erin said.

"You'll be okay?"

"Yeah. I'll eat something and watch TV until she comes down, or Kari arrives. It'll be okay."

Aunt Sherry gave Erin a hug. "Once you help Genell, you need to have some fun, okay?"

Erin nodded, not trusting herself to speak for the lump in her throat. If Alden wouldn't love her, she'd need to look elsewhere. She really didn't know anyone else.

The boys would be grown soon, and wouldn't need her. It was time to start her own life. College would be a good place to start.

Chapter 6

Dusk filtered in through the window.

Tammy sat up and wiped her eyes. Her stomach growled. No one had called her to dinner. She crept down the stairs, trying to avoid any of her family. Her parents would be mad, her brothers pesty, and Erin, well, who knew anymore?

A note on the kitchen table said her parents had taken her brothers to a movie in town. Four less people to worry about.

She opened the fridge to find something.

Voices on the television clicked off.

Tammy grabbed a bowl of something without looking and opened it.

The kitchen door opened.

Best to ignore Erin. They'd left her behind as a babysitter again. At seventeen, she didn't need a babysitter!

"I'll be in the other room. We need to talk." Erin held the living room door open.

Tammy pretended she didn't hear her, and walked to the microwave. She shoved the bowl in, and pushed one minute.

Erin waited until the timer went off, then left.

She pulled the bowl out to realize she had heated a bowl of sweet pears. Ugh. Warm pears wouldn't make a meal.

The day had been a whirlwind. Much as she wanted to blame Erin, she couldn't.

The kitchen door banged again.

If her brothers bothered her, she'd chase them to their rooms.

A purple bag dropped on the table beside her.

Tammy gulped and looked up into her older sister's strained face.

Kari didn't say a word about her dinner choice. She pushed the bowl away, and took the spoon from Tammy. She sat down on the floor, took Tammy's hands, and said, "Tell me."

Tammy struggled through the story of the day. It had always been this way. Her mom had been so busy raising their pesky brothers. Her sister had always been there for her. Especially when Erin was too bossy in her babysitter role.

When she finished, Kari wiped the hair out Tammy's eyes. "I wish I could fix these problems for you. They are your first grown up problems. I can still listen, and guide you. What do you want?"

"I want Genell to be my friend again. We have a foal to raise, together. Maybe she can show her."

Kari shook her head. "Genell will be in college, and have no time for showing. Especially, if she has a boyfriend."

"She doesn't need Bain. Genell has me for a friend."

"Don't you want to grow up? Mom was your age when she met dad."

"I thought Genell and I would be friends forever. I want Erin to be who she was. Not Mrs. Jensen's granddaughter. Corey shies away from me now. While creepy Alden wants my help. And I blew it. None of them will ever trust me now. Mrs. Jensen said I'll be a hermit."

Kari squeezed her hands. "We all do that once or twice. Do you want my old room?"

Tammy's heart leapt. That would be wonderful. Erin had always shared her room, and never been any fun. One look at Kari's eyes and she knew what Kari wanted her to say. "Wouldn't that be running from my problems?"

Kari stood up. "I think you both need a bit of privacy. She is an adult you know. It's kinda selfish for you to insist on staying in your nursery room."

"I never insisted! I begged to get away."

"When was the last time you mentioned it?"

Tammy thought about that for a while. "No idea, really. I expected her to move to your room when you went to college."

Kari turned from washing a dish in the sink. "Tammy, the room you share was her room first. Why should she leave it?"

"I never knew. No one ever tells me anything anymore."

Kari laughed. "We tell you. Sometimes though, stories like this are so old, you forget them. Before we moved here, when you were five, Erin threatened to throw you out of her room forever. You begged to stay."

"Did I?"

"Erin sang you to sleep every night. Now she wants to come stay with me."

Tammy went to the fridge to look for more a more substantial dinner.

"She can't stay with you at college."

"Why not? She could take classes. She is older than me."

"No one would teach Joe and Mark."

"Or protect you from them." Kari smiled as Tammy turned to her.

"So, can I come, and leave her here?"

"Abandon her? Never give her a future? You are a selfish sister!"

Tammy's mind whirled. "No. She said I need to work somewhere for the summer. I can't legally drive. Only farm equipment. If I stay with you in the city, I can ride the bus, or walk. Then, Erin can stay with you next fall for classes. We can share a room and pass without seeing each other."

Kari hugged Tammy. "Of course you can. I'll talk to mom tonight. You eat and let me talk to Erin."

Kari walked into the television room.

Tammy was sure Erin had heard every word. She munched a plate of spinach and bacon bits. Not a bad idea. She didn't remember liking Erin. Wonder what had changed? When, and why had Erin stopped singing?

Chapter 7

"Are you sure, you can leave now?" Kari stood in the open doorway.

Tammy stuffed her shirts in a suitcase Erin had loaned her. "Sure. Genell doesn't want me as a friend anymore. Erin said she'd collect the eggs. What else is there?"

Erin looked up from her laptop. "Don't forget clean underwear. And do you have many in the dirty clothes?"

"Don't know," Tammy said.

"Did you pack nice clothes? Barn clothes won't get you a job in the city."

She riffled through the pile. "A few. Where are my shoes?" Tammy reached for her favorite shoes. They were mud covered, with the soles slipping apart from the upper section. She tossed them aside, and searched the closet floor, and shelves for her other pair. Shoved in the back, on the top shelf were an almost clean pair she barely recognized. Her foot would slip in, at least partially. She looked up to her sister and Erin.

"I don't really want your ratty shoes in my clean car," Kari said. "Can't be helped. We'll go shoe shopping tomorrow, after my morning class."

"Thanks. You're the best!"

"Take these. I outgrew them many years ago. They will do until tomorrow." Erin handed her a pair of white shoes.

Something about them was familiar. No time to think about it. She grabbed her stuffed horse, slammed the suitcase shut, and turned to her sister. "Let's go."

Kari drove in the dark to her town apartment.

Tammy squirmed and jerked, trying to stay awake. The thirty minute ride stretched as if it took a day. Something nagged about home. It had to be Genell.

Her sister turned into the parking lot of the apartment building.

Tammy jumped out. She grabbed her suitcase, and beat Kari to the door.

Inside it was dim. Kari's roommate, Nancy, was studying on the couch by candle light.

"Hi Tammy. Come to stay a few days?"

"The whole summer! I get to work somewhere."

"Oh good. Any idea where?"

Tammy dropped her suitcase by the couch. "No. I haven't had time to think. It's been a long day."

"Well, I'm off to bed. Guess I have to study in my room now." Nancy laughed and picked up her candle.

"You don't have to run off."

"I have an early class. I'll fix breakfast if you like in the morning."

Tammy nodded.

Kari brought her blankets and a pillow. "Go to sleep sis. It's been a long day, and tomorrow won't be short either."

Tammy threw the pillow on the couch and snuggled under the blanket with her horse.

Kari's voice droned in her room. Either studying, or on the phone, Tammy couldn't decide.

"Good morning sunshine." Nancy opened the front curtains. The sun peeked through the grimy windows. "Breakfast in fifteen minutes."

Tammy groaned and sat up. It took a moment to remember all that had happened yesterday. She wouldn't cry today, or ever again. An adventure in the city awaited her.

Kari studied at the table.

Eggs and bacon, her normal breakfast, didn't seem so appetizing today. She stirred them up and nibbled slowly.

"Where do you plan to start today?" Nancy asked.

Tammy looked around and realized Nancy was talking to her. Oops. They always made plans, told her about them, and asked if she wanted to join. Having never been in the city to job hunt, she didn't know where to start.

"How do I find a job?"

Nancy laughed. "Hasn't Erin taught you that?"

"I think we were supposed to talk about it after this summer."

Kari glanced at Nancy, then back at her notes.

"What do you want to do in the future?" Kari asked.

"I want to work with horses and kids, except bratty brothers."

"Not much of a place to start here," Nancy said. "How about try the college Clucker?"

Kari closed her book. "She can ride to campus with us this morning. It's as good a place to start as any. Are you ready to go? We need to leave in five minutes."

Tammy swallowed her last bit of breakfast and ran to grab the shoes Erin had given her. "What do I need to get a job?"

"You have no job history, except the farm, so a pen will do. I'll show you where to meet us after you finish applying. Class will be about two hours long, so you may have a wait."

"I can go to the bookstore for a soda. I think I have some change." Tammy tied her shoes, making sure the loops looked right. Her sister had never let her out of sight in town before.

An hour later Tammy tapped her toes under the icy plastic chair. The Clucker stunk of some unrecognizable odor. That manager, Olly, had kept her waiting for over thirty minutes. If he wasn't going to interview her, she would go find someone who would.

She clasped her hands to stand.

A tall, extremely thin man stepped through the swinging doors. "Tammy? One moment. Let me get your application." He pulled a chair up uncomfortably close to her.

"You live on a farm and have no job. What do you do there?"

"I feed the chickens and gather eggs. I ride the horses too."

"Okay. Any experience cooking."

Tammy shook her head. "Very little. Mrs. Jensen was supposed to teach me. I forgot when I came to town last night."

"Are you normally forgetful?" Olly peered at her.

"Not usually. Yesterday was a bad day."

"Oh. Running from the farm to the city. I see. Let me check your references." He stood up and strode to the door. "Do you have any references other than family and neighbors?"

"No."

"Okay."

Tammy stood up and walked to the window. It looked out over the campus. Across the plaza the library loomed. As much as she despised reading, maybe someone there could help her.

"Tammy," Olly said. "Come along. I'll show you around the restaurant. You can start tomorrow. You will need black skid safe shoes. Wouldn't want to get those grease covered."

The tour of the restaurant only lasted a few minutes. Stinky fryers warmed up, behind the counter. Red hot bun warmers sat nearby, ready for the customers who would soon be there.

"Any questions?" Olly handed her a used greasy uniform.

"I didn't see a stove to cook vegetables, or an oven to bake meat."

Olly laughed. "We serve college students. If it isn't fried, they don't want it. If they want a salad, they go off campus. See you tomorrow at 10 am."

He handed her a cold grease covered bag. "Try a few fried chicken pieces. You'll like them."

At least she had gotten the job. Tammy walked across the campus. A tree invited her to sit. A reminder of home. She tried to munch the hard pieces of greasy leftovers from the day before. It didn't taste, or even look like chicken.

This wasn't what she wanted to do. Nancy and Kari seemed to think it was okay for a first job. Maybe, if she made her mistakes here. At least it would be convenient.

Clouds in the sky shifted and moved. One looked like a horse's head. It slowly drifted away to join a mountainous cloud in the distance.

A chattering brought her mind back to today. A squirrel at scampered at her feet. It tried to drag the nasty chicken, fake as it was, from the greasy bag.

Tammy laughed.

"Don't you dare feed the squirrels! Do you want to get bitten like Ang did?" A male yelled.

The squirrel scampered off to a nearby tree, chattering loudly.

"What? I didn't know it was there. Squirrels don't usually bother people."

The male laughed. "Only if they are in a stew. Leave 'em alone girl. You can get in trouble for feeding them here, even if you do feed them back home." He threw a piece of bark at the squirrel and stalked off.

Squirrel's hid nuts for pigs to find, they couldn't be that bad. She held out the fake chicken, and the squirrel came back. It grabbed the piece and ran for the tree. Balanced on a branch, it watched her in between nibbles. After it finished eating, it scampered around the tree.

Tammy laughed.

Kari and Nancy walked up.

"You got the job. Good work." Kari said. "Let's go shopping.

"I hate shopping." Tammy picked up the greasy uniform, and emptied the crumbs from the bag for the squirrel.

"Better get used to it. Learn from the manager. Everything he does, you may have to do someday." Nancy said.

"That place is so nasty. And the odor. I doubt mom or Erin would ever go in there."

"Maybe not. Most work is nasty though, so try. There is a campus work program, once you are a student. Maybe you can work in the library then, like we do." Kari laughed as she opened the car door.

Tammy groaned. Perhaps this was all a nightmare, and she would wake up at a slumber party with Genell beside her, Corey in the next room, and Lilly nickering in the paddock below.

Erin would walk over to wake her up, and take her home to chores and a big breakfast. She wasn't exactly a sister, and had always been closer to Kari. There was something about her that Tammy needed to remember. The odor in the Clucker had stirred up a series of memories of Erin that weren't clear.

"I forgot, Mrs. Jensen was supposed to teach me to cook starting next week."

"That's not the only thing you forgot. I had a call from Erin. Apparently Alden asked for your help today to. Or did you intend to forget that?"

Kari's grin said a lot. She knew Tammy thought Alden was creepy. Too old to be anything, except creepy.

"I forgot. Corey told me anyway, not Alden."

"Uh huh." The light changed to green and Kari drove on.

Chapter 8

Erin turned the car into the lane at Mare Valley. Her heart thumped hard in her chest. If Genell's mom didn't see Tammy, she would ask questions, and it wasn't Erin's place to answer them.

The farm buzzed with activity. Birds perched on fences sang their early morning duets. People scurried around moving horses between pastures. Dogs and cats lazed in the walkways.

Alden waited with Genell on the front porch. He hugged her, and helped her to the car.

"Stay safe." Alden closed the door and waited.

Nothing normal about this. If anyone was watching, they'd know Erin wasn't taking Genell and Tammy on a shopping trip.

"You're sure?" Erin asked.

Genell nodded and hid her face.

Erin took a deep breath and pulled away from the front of the house.

Choco barked at the rear tires.

Erin turned the radio down so Genell could talk.

Genell turned it back up and hid her face in her hands.

The trip to the clinic took longer than expected due to people sightseeing and breaking at every horse farm.

Erin pulled into the clinic parking spot and turned off the vehicle. "You can still change your mind. Calling your mom might be easier than telling her in person."

Genell shook her head and choked back a tear. She bit her finger and refused to look at Erin. "Is he here?"

"I don't see Bain. I'm not opening the door for you." Erin waited, with her hands on the steering wheel. There was still time to cancel the appointment. People did it all the time.

Genell glared at her, opened the door, and stepped out. She glanced around and rushed into the clinic so no one would see her.

Erin picked up a book and stepped out. Let people on the road think she was the patient here. She walked with her head up into the building.

Genell sat in a corner under a sign declaring the year 2000 changes to medical coverage.

Erin sat next to her.

Genell turned away.

Why Genell blamed her and Tammy, she had no idea. Genell used to laugh and giggle about her escapades with Bain, even though she knew Erin didn't have a chance with Alden. Even though Genell was selfish, she didn't deserve Bain abandoning her at the first sign of change.

A nurse called Genell's name.

Genell struggled up. She didn't glance back. With her head hung low, she followed the nurse.

Erin sighed and opened the book. It was upside down. The letters danced on the page, words forming and unforming before her eyes.

Tears would be fought back. There was no need to cry.

She had never been good friends with Genell.

Tammy had been her friend. She had been forgotten and pushed aside for Bain. Now the death of Lilly, and Genell's anger, would make it worse. All the two had worked for together for years, had been wrapped up in Lilly.

Blinks later, the letters adjusted back to normal. The book in her hand was a mystery that combined science and history. A puzzle to solve should keep her mind focused.

"Erin?" A nurse read her clipboard. "Genell will be out soon. Do you need anything?"

Erin shook her head and closed the book. The heroine had been about to explain how to cover her tracks when walking through brush so the home owner would never see footsteps. Might help her to weed and clean around Grandmother's when no one was looking.

The door opened. A different nurse pushed Genell out in a wheelchair.

Groggy, Genell barely lifted her head, and then lowered it.

No, Bain hadn't arrived, though he knew she would be here.

The nurse helped Genell into the car.

"Keep her calm, and quiet a day or two. She'll be fine," the nurse said.

"I hope so. She's suffered a lot of loss the last few days."

"They all have. Everyone who comes through here has suffered unimaginable pain."

"If it's so unimaginable, how come so many go through it?"

"If I knew the answer to that, I could save the world." The nurse pushed the wheelchair back into the building.

Erin dropped her book on the back seat before climbing in.

The drive back was quiet. Genell stayed groggy, or pretended to be. The nurse said she was fine. Erin tried not to worry. If Genell wanted to suffer, she would have to let her, at least until she was home.

The driveway back to Aunt Sherry's home appeared darker and denser than she remembered. The sun filtered through trees and brush. Shadows waved in the light breeze.

Aunt Sherry waited on the porch. She scurried down the steps. "The boys are helping their father in the fields today."

Opening the door, she reached for Genell. "Come on. We have to get you upstairs."

"Home," Genell whispered.

"When you're better," Aunt Sherry said. She took Genell by the arm.

They half pulled her out of the car, and dragged her up the stairs.

Erin followed and helped settle Genell in Tammy's bed.

At least she had cleaned Tammy's side of the room.

She covered Genell with a blanket.

Her neighbor struggled to get up.

"Rest. Tammy isn't here, and won't be for a few days." Erin smoothed her hand across Genell's head, much as she used to for Tammy whenever she had a fever.

"Rest now. I'll be back with something to eat and drink soon."

Genell's dilated eyes searched the room. Her hands clenched the covers to her chest.

Erin didn't want to leave her. Something wasn't right. Genell was too upset. What could she be afraid of?

Aunt Sherry arrived with a tray with soup, and a cup of water. She sat beside the bed.

"I'll be here when you are ready to talk. Or, would you rather talk to Mrs. Jensen?"

No movement from her. Only a small groan.

"Sit up and eat some soup. You need your strength."

Genell struggled to sit, and pulled herself back to the headboard.

Aunt Sherry sat the tray on her lap. She left the room with a backward glance at Erin.

"Bad as Lilly?" Genell took a sip from the spoon.

Erin closed her eyes a second, and reached for Genell's empty hand. "No. You are alive. Everything is fine."

"There was no 'right' answer was there?"

"Knowing your mom, no." Erin pulled away.

"You'll be fine in a few days. We can go to the city and college together." Erin placed the bowl on a table.

"Could I have tried to keep it a secret and give it away?" Genell asked.

If only she had. Something stirred in Erin's chest.

"Your mom would expect you home every weekend, and every holiday. If you couldn't tell her now, when could you? And not only that, studying would have been more difficult."

Genell nodded, and slid back down into the bed.

Erin moved over to her bed to read. An email icon flashed on the open laptop. A message from Alden to call Kari and remind Tammy about the foal, if she thought it was a good idea.

Always the middle person. The unwanted nanny, watching those around her grow up and fly off into their own lives leaving her behind. Alone. Forgotten. She wasn't that much older than them. She felt trapped without a true way forward. Soon, only the young teen boys would be left at home. Not for long.

She replied back that she'd think about it. Genell was safe, though depressed, as expected. There was a long pause before she could tap send. There was so much more she wanted to say, and couldn't. She'd tried so many times.

Only yesterday, she'd felt the ache in stomach at the way Alden watched Tammy. If only he'd look at her that way. She wasn't that much older than him.

Finally, she tapped send, and collapsed back on her bed to read.

Genell stared at her from Tammy's pillow.

A door slammed downstairs. Mark and Joe's voices floated up the stairs. Time to go teach and prepare dinner.

"You okay?"

No answer. Genell appeared asleep.

Erin picked up the tray and placed it on a small table beside the bed.

Chapter 9

"Hi. I'm Zorina. I'll be training you," a woman not much older than Tammy said.

"Shouldn't Olly train me?" Tammy asked.

Zorina laughed. "He won't train you. You're too young. Come on." She showed Tammy how to work the fryers and the bun warmer.

It wasn't difficult. The most difficult task was figuring out the cash register.

Oil from the fryers leaded onto her uniform every time she placed a basket in, or pulled it out. Mustard and ketchup smeared her shirt as she wiped dirty tables and the counter. The customers were nastier eaters than her pesky little brothers. She'd have to wash out her uniform in the sink tonight, and likely every night. Nancy had warned her that might happen.

The day moved at a feverish pace. Tammy tried to keep up with the shouts from all sides. Zorina, customers, and even Olly seemed to yell every other minute for something. As if they didn't know how to speak like a person, and could only shout like pesky boys.

Late that afternoon, she walked out of the restaurant.

"How did you manage that?" Nancy asked.

Tammy smiled. "Which one? The mustard plaster in my hair by one of your old boyfriends? Or the grease "V" down the front of my shirt?"

"And the ketchup on your brand new shoes! What will Kari say?"

Nancy marched her into another imposing building that turned out to be an athletic center, and straight to a shower stall bank.

Odors of sweat, strange soaps, and chemicals clashed.

She sneezed.

Nancy grabbed a handful of paper towels to soak until they dripped. "Don't say anything about any of my old boyfriends. As if! Hope that ketchup stain comes out." She scrubbed Tammy's hair harder than necessary.

Tammy scrubbed her shoes. She slipped and nearly fell into a puddle under the sink. Most of the ketchup came off, though not quite all of it.

"Thankfully, I have plenty of degreasing dish detergent at the apartment." Nancy grabbed Tammy by the shirt and dragged her back out of the building. "Did the jerk leave his name as well as the plaster?"

"No. Let go. I can walk."

Her grip loosened. Nancy let her go, glared at her, and stalked off to her car.

Tammy ran to catch up.

"Sorry," Nancy said. "There is only one jerk who would do that. Sometimes, I wish I dared leave the state to get away from him."

"Then Kari would be all alone in her apartment."

"With you there this summer, and Erin in the fall? I think not. I don't want to leave though. Everyone I know is here." Nancy grinned at her.

The next few days raced by as Tammy tried to learn to use the fryers, the bun warmer, and the register. She had helped her mom sell eggs and meat from the farm. This wasn't the same. The register had to be counted and recounted so many times, she lost track of the amount she started with each day.

Tammy was even able to choke down the stuff they called food there. Too many hours passed between meals at her sister's tiny apartment.

Kari seemed silent, and not her usual self. Several times while reading or watching TV, she'd catch her sister staring at her.

Nancy often picked her up from work. Too tired at night to ask what was wrong with Kari, Tammy would slip off to sleep with the television on. Mornings were too rushed to remember questions.

The greasy fake chicken was so nasty, that Tammy decided to try something different. When a break in the crowd came, she grabbed a few pieces and crammed it into the bun warmer.

They didn't come out the bottom in a few minutes as the buns did. Smoke trickled out from the top.

"What's burning back there?" Zorina said.

"Nothing." Tammy had to find something to get them out. They had gone all the way in the top. Why hadn't they come out the bottom?

She grabbed the tongs used to pull them out of the hot fryer and pushed it down into the opening.

"What are you doing?" Olly grabbed her hand.

"Trying to bake some chicken for a snack," Tammy said.

Olly turned off the machine. "This is an expensive piece of equipment. Chicken is meant to be fried, not baked. Go to the register, and stay there the rest of the day."

Tammy's face was hot as she turned away.

Zorina would be angry. She detested the fryers and bun warmer, almost as much as Tammy despised the register.

All afternoon, she worked the register. The grease wouldn't come off her hands and clothes. College students laughed at the grease stains as she rang up their orders. The change she handed back had an oily sheen.

One young woman walked up to her in nice clothes while she wiped tables.

Tammy was afraid to turn towards her, because the grease could be rung out of her shirt each night.

"I don't know your name, please," the young woman said.

"I'm Tammy." She turned with the filthy dish cloth from the grease smeared table.

"What happened to your arm?"

Tammy looked down at her arm. There were red spots, and not only from grease splatters. "Not sure."

"Come to the clinic tomorrow, please."

"I can't. I'm a summer employee, not a college student."

"We'll have to see about that. Ask for Vanara." The young woman turned and hurried off without any food.

The door opened to a noisy group of young men.

Tammy raced back to the counter.

After her shift, Tammy strolled across the courtyard to Nancy's usual spot under a tree. No one was around, so she rested in the shade. She leaned back against the trunk of the tree thinking about the day. It hadn't been what she thought it would be. Soon summer, and this miserable job, would be over.

The rash on her arm was worrisome. It had spread, and she had lost interest in food. That never happened. Although she didn't eat as much as Mark, she used to eat every chance food was served.

"She doesn't know."

"She probably does."

Tammy opened her eyes.

Two women who ate in the restaurant almost daily strolled past her.

"If she knew, she'd go home."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not." The shorter one ran ahead of the taller one.

Tammy sat up straighter. Surely they weren't talking about her?

"Tammy, come on!" Nancy yelled from behind her.

Tammy stood up and hurried to Nancy.

"Who are those two?"

"What two?" Nancy swung the door shut.

"Those two walking by before you called me."

Nancy looked up, and frowned. "I'm not sure which two you mean. Hurry. Kari wants us to get some groceries." She held the door open for Tammy.

Tammy sat down and pulled her legs close. Hands slipped off her greasy pants. Her stomach churned as the odor of grease increased, and her head swum.

"You okay?" Nancy pulled her seat belt on and glanced in the rear view mirror.

"Yeah. Do I have to go in looking like this? I'll leak grease all over the place."

Nancy laughed. "They are used to that. Don't worry. You'd bake in the car."

That was an image Tammy don't want to think about! Baked grease. No matter how much her mom ignored her, even she couldn't stand that.

"I'll go in." Tammy hugged her knees closer.

Nancy parked the car. She reached over and felt Tammy's head with the back of her hand. "No fever. Come on. We can find ice cream, anyway."

Even ice cream didn't sound good.

Grocery stores were a place they rarely visited back home. They grew most of their own food. Or mom went shopping, and left her home with Erin. The door opened, and an icy chill blasted across Tammy.

She rubbed her arms.

Nancy grabbed a basket and hurried in, pausing in the bread aisle.

Tammy held her nose. So much bread all in one place, and it had a strange odor. Must be mixing with the stench of her uniform. That was another food she rarely ate. Only at Genell's. The last few meals there, even her mother's prize winning breads had tasted wrong somehow. Heavier, with a slightly sickly smell.

The ice cream freezers covered a whole wall. More than she had ever seen at one time.

"Strawberry, or neo?" Nancy asked.

"Um, orange sherbet." Sherbet seemed calmer, and not as heavy. Perhaps it would be better.

Nancy stared at her and dropped the strawberry ice cream into the cart. She walked a few doors down and pulled out orange sherbet.

"You sure you're okay? What really happened at work today?"

"I'll tell you later. Can I take nap when we get to the apartment?"

Nancy dropped the box she was holding back in the cart. "How long has it been since you took mid day naps?"

"The day Lilly died."

Nancy nodded. "Okay. You have been through a lot the last few weeks."

The checkout line was a noisy, busy place. Toddlers raced in circles without regard to those around them.

Nancy piled the purchases on the register line. Ice cream, sherbet, bread, a few vegetables, and hamburger. Maybe enough for one week.

"You total will be $150.63." The cashier held out her hand.

Tammy's mouth dropped. Those few food items shouldn't cost that much.

Nancy paid for the food with cash.

They carried the bags to the car.

"Does food really cost that much?"

Breaks squeaked as Nancy backed out of the parking space. "Yes. Life outside the farm is expensive."

"How much do I need to contribute from my paycheck?"

"We'll see how much it is first. You get paid next week, right?"

"For two weeks yes. I'm not so good at math."

"Well. Expect to only receive two thirds of your pay rate." Nancy drove around the corner.

"Only two thirds?"

"The rest goes to taxes."

"That doesn't sound right." Tammy held her legs, as Nancy rounded another corner.

"Sadly, it is. You'll get used to it." Nancy pulled into the parking space.

Tammy picked up the bags. They hadn't even slid under Nancy's driving. Money. She had expected to be paid the full amount for her work. Now there would be less to buy Genell's share of Lilly's foal. That way, she could raise her, and train her.

Chapter 10

Chickens clucked and pecked.

Erin gathered their eggs. Tammy was so much better at this job. At least she enjoyed it. It would be a long summer of collecting eggs. And who would do it when Tammy left for good? Mark and Joe couldn't. They'd break them all. She trudged back to the porch.

Genell rocked and stared at the overhang.

The cordless phone lay on the table beside her. Hopefully, she had called her mother. Or even Alden.

The phone rang.

Erin answered without looking, "Hello?"

"We need to talk. You have a minute?" Kari's voice had a distinctive edge. Cars honked in the background.

"I'm gathering eggs."

"Is Genell better, and ready to go home?"

Erin glanced over at her.

Genell stared at the ceiling.

A month ago, she would have been at the paddock, or in the garden, constantly in motion. Now, she barely spoke to anyone.

"She should be. Most people go home the same day. She's not herself. What's wrong?"

"Tammy's not herself either. A school nurse asked her to go to the infirmary tomorrow."

"And, you don't want her to?"

More horns honked in the background. A toddler screech rose and fell.

"Sorry, the street is busy today. No, I don't want her to go. It's a rash. She's working at the Clucker. Please, tell me it's a rash."

Maybe a rash. Maybe not. "What else? She might have stumbled in poison ivy. Tammy was really upset before she left."

"She's been here two weeks. Mom always catered to you and your food allergies. I hope it isn't one."

Erin closed her eyes and walked down the porch. "Tammy often eats at Genell's. They have bread there."

"Yeah, with healthier food than the Clucker; where Tammy is immersed in grease for hours every day. Two weeks, though?"

Erin glanced up at Genell. There were secrets she had promised never to tell. So many. This time, though, this one was small, and might matter.

"Well, she eats there three or four times a week. Genell sends snacks home with her. I find junk food wrappers when I clean our room."

"Please deposit twenty-five cents." An automatic voice interrupted Kari. A tinkling sounded across the phone lines.

"I can go with her. I'd rather it be a diagnosis of a rash."

"Kari, I'm sorry. If she hadn't." Erin couldn't finish the sentence.

"No. Better to know now, then suffer for years. Break it, before it becomes a habit. I'll tell her."

The connection ended. No telling what the people waiting in line at the pay phone thought they were talking about.

Bread. Wheat. Two words rarely spoken in Aunt Sherry's home. Products containing them were banned, though the kids never knew what they were missing.

They had been banned since before the move from Indianapolis.

Erin's hands shook. Her fourteenth summer. The year of tests after so much lost weight. The doctors didn't want to believe she had anything wrong. Three told her she had anorexia.

Aunt Sherry counted every piece of food she ate for two weeks. No way to escape, and no time alone, anywhere. Finally, Aunt Sherry took her to one last doctor. The one who ran two more tests. The blood test came back positive.

The next test showed she had severe complications.

No wheat, no gluten, and a bland diet for at least six weeks.

They tried to stay in Indianapolis.

No luck.

Daily, Tammy brought home snacks and treats from kindergarten, and begged Erin to share them. Erin couldn't eat school lunches, or in the lunchroom at all.

Finding gluten free food was a nightmare, and expensive. Erin couldn't expect Aunt Sherry to cater to her every need. She begged to go stay with her grandmother.

Aunt Sherry relented for a few weeks. Instead of sending her alone, she went home to her own mother. The whole family was invited back to Kentucky to live.

She gave up her career in home decorating to teach Erin and Kari, who in turn taught the younger children.

Now, the tables had turned. Erin had always depended on Tammy in a way no one realized. Now, Tammy depended on her, more than ever.

Erin picked up the egg basket. "Genell, I'm going inside. Let me know if you see the boys." She walked past the silent, rocking Genell.

The door banged shut behind her.

Aunt Sherry looked up from her screen. "Pale face, cheer up. Genell will get better."

Erin pulled out a chair and sat down.

"I've never left for a reason. Where would I go? What would I do? I remember school. I couldn't eat around other people. How could I ever have a social life, or a job?"

Aunt Sherry closed the laptop and took Erin's hand. "What's brought this on?"

"Tammy." Erin broke into tears. "I don't want her to go through what I did. Her personality, it would kill her. She deserves to be normal."

Aunt Sherry squeezed her hand. "Erin, we will find a way. We already know so much. The tests will be easier on her."

Erin nodded and sniffled. "She won't be called anorexic at least."

Aunt Sherry smiled. "Let's hope not. Those doctors were nasty, weren't they? Wonder how many anorexic people are that way due to food allergies?"

"Never thought of that." She sniffed and blew her nose.

"What do we know?"

"Call Kari and find out." Erin listened to the conversation.

Aunt Sherry reassured Kari as well. Likely a blood test would confirm, and if there was still doubt, the scope test could be ordered. No confusion, no shouting, no screaming doctors telling her to eat more bread, and she'd be fine.

It would explain the slight apparent weight loss for Tammy. The drawn face, and moodiness. It wasn't teen hormones, not always.

Aunt Sherry placed the phone on the table and waited.

Erin shifted under her gaze. Aunt Sherry wanted something, what this time?

"What can I do? Can I go to college?"

"Sure. Anytime you want."

"You know what I mean. I can't go out with friends to eat. Can't have a pizza. Surprised Mark and Joe don't ask for it."

"They've never had one to know about it."

"Is it fair to them to miss out on normal kid food?"

"Is it normal kid food? Since when? Are they missing out if they are undiagnosed? I never had to worry as long as I kept the whole house gluten free. That's unfair to you, more than them. You do all the cooking and cleaning."

Aunt Sherry's phone rang. She raised her eyebrow at the number. "It's your dad. You better answer."

"I didn't know he had your number." Erin picked up the phone.

Chapter 11

Tammy plopped down on the couch and pulled her knees to her chin.

Nancy fried hamburger and boiled water. The phone rang. She dropped the spatula to answer it.

"Hi Kari. She's resting. Chocolate? Sounds good."

"Kari'll be home in a few minutes. Please set the table." Nancy stirred the burger.

Tammy pulled herself off the couch. Everything felt so heavy, as if she were wearing a rock suit. She reached for the cabinet with the plates. The handle dropped out of her hand, rolled onto the counter, and down to the floor. She stared at it. She opened the cabinet from the bottom, and kicked the handle under the counter.

Nancy banged the spoon as she cracked and broke noodles into the boiling water. "Hurry, I need you to make the garlic bread while I watch the noodles."

Tammy pulled three plates out, and waddled to the table. Her hand rested on the table, and she perked up a bit. The silverware was in the drainer, so she didn't have to open the drawer.

"You okay?" Nancy asked.

"Tireder than I've ever been before."

"Fever?" Nancy held the spoon above the pan and watched her.

Tammy shook her head. Talking was too much effort. She dropped the forks beside the plates and walked over to the counter. The garlic bread was on a cookie sheet, ready to be shoved in the oven.

"Don't forget butter!" Nancy stirred the noodles.

Tammy pulled butter out the fridge, and plopped it on the bread.

Nancy scowled. She moved out of the way for Tammy to open the oven. "Do I need to do it?"

Tammy pulled the tray off the counter and shoved it in.

Kari walked in the door with two bags. "Chocolate cake for my two best friends."

She sat the bags on a nearby counter and grabbed Tammy's cheeks. "You'll feel better soon."

Tammy sat at the table and ignored the chocolate cake. A few weeks ago, she would have laughed and begged for a piece before

dinner. Cake, and other goodies were something they never had at home. She had to go to Genell's to find them.

Genell still hadn't called, or forgiven her.

She grabbed her elbows and hid her face between them on the table. No one could see her cry. Kari and Nancy were good to her, and she was being a baby. Time to be as grown up as they expected. As she pulled her head up, she wiped her eyes.

Kari plopped the hot, greasy bread on the table.

Nancy tossed the spaghetti together with the hamburger, sauce, and bottle of Italian salad dressing.

"I don't want to interrupt your studies tonight. Kari, can I take a nap in your bed, until you are tired."

Kari and Nancy stared at her.

"No studies tonight," Kari said. "We're going to watch a movie and eat popcorn and cake. A slumber party."

"In the middle of the school week?"

Kari sat down and passed her the bread. "It's Thursday. Don't tell mom. No classes Friday."

Tammy piled her plate with spaghetti. Nancy's food was always delicious. After only a few bites, she could barely swallow. She tried the bread, and the taste was wrong. She wanted to spit it out, and didn't dare.

Kari and Nancy talked away about classes and other students as if they were alone at the table. It wasn't like them to not pay attention to her.

She slipped away to the couch and curled up.

Before long, Kari was there with a plate of chocolate cake. "Come on, eat this. You'll feel better."

Tammy took the fork, and tasted the chocolate. The icing was perfect. She dug deep into the cake. It was moist and slipped apart. Upon reaching her mouth, she nearly gagged. The cake tasted like sand. She reached her finger out to touch the cake. Texture and taste didn't match. The fork dropped onto the plate.

Kari took the plate and walked back to the kitchen.

Nancy brought out a bag of popcorn.

At least that smelled, felt, and tasted right.

Tammy woke the next morning, a strange sensation in her mouth. She felt the corners of her mouth, and there was dried

blood. No blood had been there before. The popcorn had been salty, though surely not that salty.

"Good morning sleepyhead," Nancy said.

"We already ate. Come on, let's hurry," Kari said.

"I have to have breakfast before work," Tammy said.

Kari grabbed her backpack and keys. "No work today. I broke my own rule. You can call in sick later. Come on."

Tammy grumbled her way to change clothes. Several things weren't right, though she couldn't pinpoint them.

She grabbed her backpack, wondering where Kari would take her today.

"Will we eat out?"

"Maybe later," Kari said.

They left the apartment.

"How do you feel?" Kari started the car.

"Still tired. Like I didn't sleep enough."

Kari turned the radio up. After a short drive, she pulled up in front of a large building on the campus. "Okay, time for you to get a check up."

"What?"

"Time for you to get a check up."

"I'm not sick. It's too much stress, and a job in a nasty place."

Kari took her hand, "Sure sis. I believe you. Please promise me you will tell the doctor all of your symptoms."

Tammy pulled away. "No problem. It's not like I'm pregnant or anything. I don't even like guys!"

Kari brushed her forehead. "Well, that's a relief. If you ever have these symptoms again, after being with a guy, you might want to check. Come on."

"Genell's grown to like Bain in the last few months for some reason. Guess she likes him better than me now." Tammy opened the door. It was far heavier than it should be. She pushed to close the door, and it stuck half open. Then, the curb tripped her.

Kari took her hand, "What's your favorite thing back home?"

The parking lot was a long way from the building. "Well, creepy Alden wanted me to help with Lilly's colt. Corey runs from me. Though, I feel funny when I see him. It's a good funny, if you know what I mean."

Kari squeezed her hand. "I sure do. Now, let's try to think of something nice to do this afternoon. Maybe you would like to sign up for a summer class?"

"Can I really?"

"Sure, maybe something easy and fun. Take a physical activity class. Or some other required time waster, in a full college student's schedule." Kari pulled the door open.

"I don't want to be a geneticist like you do," Tammy said.

"What do you want?" Kari walked up to the counter to check her in.

Tammy sat down in a corner and picked up a magazine.

"Oh no you don't." Kari handed her a clipboard.

"You aren't a kid anymore once you come here. Fill it out. Ask if you don't know the answers."

Tammy took the pages and sifted through the questions. Some were so private she blushed at what they asked.

"Answer truthfully. I'm not looking over your shoulder. I will go back with you for a few minutes, then come out and leave you to your checkup, if you want." Kari glanced up from a magazine.

She gulped and nodded. The questionnaire finally completed, Tammy handed the clipboard back to Kari.

Kari held up her hands. "Nope. Take it to the counter. She'll have a question or two for you."

Tammy's hands shook, and her stomach lurched. She walked to the counter. Kari expected so much of her. If she really wanted to come to college in a year or two, she needed to start now. How had Kari managed? Had mom come with her at first to college? She couldn't remember. She glanced back at Kari.

Kari smiled and waved.

Tammy squared her shoulders and walked to the counter.

The rest of the morning was a hunger induced haze. The nurse and doctor took her vital signs, wrote things down, and listened to Kari and her talk about family.

During the blood drawing, Kari and the doctor stepped out of the exam room.

Did her mom know she was here today, having blood work and other tests done? It all seemed so personal. Doctors collecting all her bodily fluids to prove she was healthy enough to take a college

class. It didn't make sense. Neither did the way she felt yesterday, or today.

Kari walked back in the room. "Come on sis, I think they're done. We'll go find Nancy, and go to the park."

"We can feed the ducks," Tammy said.

"And paddle boat, after we've had a good picnic lunch."

"No left over spaghetti please."

Kari laughed and pulled her close. "Nope. None of that."

Chapter 12

Places were set at the table.

Erin stirred peas and carrots.

Tammy's place was empty. The kitchen was quiet. Too quiet without her pestering questions and complaints of studying science, Mark and Joe's pranks, or even Genell ignoring her for Bain. That had come full circle.

After two weeks, Genell had not gone home. Apparently, she couldn't face her mom. Or perhaps, Alden, who had tried to protect her.

Genell sauntered into the kitchen and plopped in a chair. "I told mom I was staying to watch movies with Tammy again."

"She still doesn't know Tammy isn't here?" The spoon in her hand dropped into the pan of vegetables. Erin hadn't been to Mare Valley on purpose. She could never lie to Mrs. Farlan.

"Nope."

"Tammy is coming home for the weekend." None too soon either. Tammy was a far better roommate than Genell. No matter how sloppy Tammy was. Though Genell was suffering, her crying out in her sleep kept Erin awake.

"She doesn't know?" Genell rested her chin on her hands and stared into the empty bowl.

"Not a thing. She has her own worries right now." Erin carried the large pan to the table. Enough vegetables to feed six people for two meals. Somehow, it'd all be gone by morning.

"She okay?"

"She will be. Do you want her to visit you, or stay away a bit?" A wooden potholder needed straightening. In fact, and few pieces were burnt and twisted. It needed replacing. Erin placed another beside it.

"Stay away I guess. Where's the rolls?" Genell unfolded her napkin.

Erin drew a deep breath through her mouth. Now was not the time to explain to Genell, if she didn't know by now. Surely two weeks without bread would have clued her in. "Guess they are all gone."

"Tammy always did say that was why she liked eating at my house. So many more choices in food, and bread at every meal." She tapped the table.

"She has been eating there often hasn't she?"

"I invite her every chance I get. You know that. Alden is glad to see her every time she comes. I do it for him to."

That remark stung her heart and brain. She glared hard at Genell. "You haven't dumped her alone when out with Bain have you?"

"No. Mom is always there, along with Alden, Corey, and dozens of farm workers. The place is a nightmare. Constant commotion. At least it's calmer here. Even with Mark and Joe around."

Calm. Genell must really not want to go home if she thought Balanced Farm was a relaxing place to be. Then again, no one had expected her to do anything other than eat, sleep, and recover. She had done no housework, yard work, or farm work in two weeks. Horse care was different at Mare Valley. Erin placed a large pan of baked chicken on the table. Chicken that had clucked yesterday.

Aunt Sherry ushered Joe and Mark into the kitchen.

They chattered continuously. Bouncing back and forth between calf stories and the garden weeding. As the boys gobbled the food, they left far less than half for the next day's lunch. At fourteen and twelve, they were showing how much more she, or Aunt Sherry, would have to cook to keep them through the next few growth spurts.

She knew what Genell would say if she asked her what she wanted to eat. Something should be said to break the tension. What, Erin didn't know. That was Tammy's expertise.

What Tammy was going through could end her friendship with Genell, even if it hadn't already been damaged beyond repair. Genell didn't sound like she cared, if she ever had. Perhaps Tammy had always been the friend who simply did half her chores for her. That wasn't fair. Surely Tammy had meant her friendship with Genell.

Her neighbor picked at the meal, scooting the meat and vegetables around the plate.

After lunch, Erin picked up the empty dishes to wash them.

"Mark, why don't and Joe help with dishes. Let's make it a game. Can you get them as clean as your show calf?"

"We can try." Mark grabbed a stack of bowls and whisked it away.

Erin grabbed his dirt stained hands after he dropped the bowls in the sink. "Not with gardened hands. Wash them first. Both of you."

The boys trooped off.

Normally, it was her job to remind the boys to wash their hands before they ate. Had Aunt Sherry noticed she forgot? She spooned up a piece of chicken and some vegetables into a container for her uncle. He rarely left the crops during weeding season for lunch.

Aunt Sherry had gone to the TV room to rest a half hour before her afternoon chores of feeding the cows and horses.

Genell stood up and rummaged through cabinets, and then the fridge.

"What are you looking for?"

"You have to have biscuits, or cookies, or donuts somewhere. Where do you keep them?"

The boys trooped down the stairs.

"Not here Genell. Not allowed in the house. You will have to go home for that."

Genell stuck out her lower lip and pouted. "Glad I'm going home in a few hours. I'm hungry." She placed the plate full of chicken and vegetables on the counter and stalked off into the TV room with Aunt Sherry.

The boys bustled back into the kitchen dripping water everywhere.

Perhaps, she should have spent more time training the boys, and let Tammy learn more on her own. The floor would be soaked by the time they finished washing.

Erin showed them the finer points of dish washing, then stepped back to watch Joe and Mark.

They laughed and played almost as much as they washed.

Tammy had been like that once. So had Kari. Had she ever been so playful and carefree?

At last, the dishes were dried and put away. Mark and Joe prepared to race toward the TV room.

"Nope." Erin handed a damp cloth to Joe, and a mop to Mark.

"Don't forget to wipe the counter and table. You spilled more water than drained out, so a quick mop will do."

"Do we have to." Mark groaned.

"You made the mess. I said have fun, not make more work." Erin crossed her arms and tapped her foot.

Mark shot her a dirty look. He half mopped the floor, and then chased his brother to the TV room.

A cup of tea would be nicer than the family this afternoon. She fixed a cup and walked to the front porch.

Should she try to explain to Genell at all.

Somehow, she would have to explain it all to Tammy. Who wouldn't understand. Her distaste of science would make it even more difficult. If she liked genetics as much as Mark and Joe, or Kari, she would understand.

Aunt Sherry walked out the door. "Thinking about your dad's visit?"

Erin shook her head. "Haven't gotten that far. I'm thinking what I am going to tell Tammy."

Aunt Sherry took her hand. "That should be my job."

"You took care of me all those years. She needs to hear it from someone who knows." Erin drank some tea and waited. "Does dad know?"

"No idea. I'm not sure it ever came up. It didn't matter when he was a thousand miles away, did it?"

"He's coming in two weeks. If Grandma doesn't relent, I don't know what to do."

"I'm so sorry." Aunt Sherry hugged Erin.

Strength slipped out of her. Instead of standing tall, and pulling away, she leaned against Aunt Sherry. Another summer of life altering decisions. What did she really want from life? What about Tammy, and even Kari? Meeting her dad, whom she couldn't remember. Not her idea of the dream of a peaceful summer before leaving for college.

Chapter 13

Conversation buzzed and machines hummed throughout the Clucker.

Tammy plopped a tray of fried fake chicken on the counter in front of a glaring customer. "This is the best we can do."

The man shoved it back at her. "Look at the grease pooling under that nasty whatever it is. It's not chicken."

Grease splashed onto her shimmering, dripping uniform. "I know that! It's disgusting. I won't eat it."

"And yet, you serve it to me?" He raised his eyebrow and leaned forward.

"I have to work for the summer."

"Tammy! Can I have a word with you? Now!" Olly yelled from behind the food wall.

She glanced toward Olly, and then to the customer.

"Here." The man shoved a business card at her.

"Call me when you are ready to find a real job." He turned and stalked out the door. As he let go of the door, his left hand made a half wave.

The tray of fake chicken turned dull as the grease chilled.

Tammy sighed, picked up the card, and shoved it in her pocket. She left the tray of congealed fried grease on the counter.

Zorina had warned her that Olly calling her name would never be a good thing.

He tapped his foot. "How dare you insult the delicacies of this restaurant. All the college students eat here. If you despise the food so much, you can leave now, and find another job."

There was nothing to say. She didn't want the job. Work was uncomfortable, and wrong somehow. The food made her nauseous. People laughed at her grease smeared clothes and cash register errors. "I'll bring my uniform back when I get my check."

She picked up her backpack and walked back around the divider.

"And don't expect a reference from me." Olly stood with his legs spread wide, and hands on his hips.

As if. Admitting to working at the Clucker was unlikely.

Zorina stared at her and dropped the filthy table wiping cloth.

The same one Tammy had used every day for two weeks. It had never been washed.

Tammy couldn't read Zorina's expression. Fear, joy, or what crossed behind her eyes. It no longer mattered. She was free now, and in the city. Genell hadn't called, so mustn't miss her. The door opened, leaving a gasp of putrid air behind her.

She strolled through the college campus in her grease soaked uniform. Hardly something she wanted to do. Advertise such despicable fake garbage. Sickening.

A tree gabbed her with low hanging branches. A tree and squirrels.

The shade invited welcomed her as much as the squirrels. Her legs gave out. Tammy crawled to the trunk and leaned back against it.

Squirrels chattered and ran at her feet.

She laughed and tossed nuts toward them.

A group of students strolled by noisily, and the squirrels ran off.

Tammy pulled out a book to read.

"Hey Tammy, are you ready for class today?" Nancy asked.

Tammy closed the book and looked up. "Olly fired me for agreeing with a customer."

Nancy shifted her pile of books as a teen on a bike whizzed by. "Too bad you don't have a change of clothes."

"Yeah. Didn't want to ruin any of mine."

Nancy raised her eyebrow.

"I'll never get this stench out of my hair." Tammy touched the greasy mop on her head. "I never cared about my hair before. I'd rather smell of manure than whatever is in that place."

Nancy held out her hand. "Come on. I think I have a clean outfit in the car you can borrow. It would be better to smell good for your first day of business class. Promise not to snore, though."

She laughed and took Nancy's hand.

Nancy pulled a sack of clothes and washcloths out of the trunk of the car. "Always prepare for an emergency change of clothes, and shoes." She pulled out a pair of dress shoes, and dumped them into the bag.

Tammy took the bag of clothes and shoes. She held it at arm's length to keep the grease from soaking through.

The next stop was the campus gym. A warm place, that smelled of sweat and chemicals.

"The pool's nearby. At least they provide towels, so you can take a quick shower before you change. I'll wait here. Take my washcloth though."

Tammy nodded. She pulled a worn towel from the stack.

"Not that one! Get a fuzzy one so you can dry your hair," Nancy said. "I'm going to make a phone call. Can you find the door?"

"I will." She replaced the worn towel, and grabbed a newer one. There was a hook for the towel on the outside of the stall, and a shelf under it for the bag of Nancy's clothes. Tammy stepped in and pulled the curtain too. She pulled her clothes off and dropped them on the floor outside the curtain while keeping it as closed as she could.

The showers worked different than any she had seen before. Warm water washed down her back. A thick cake of brown soap hung on a rope nearby. Since she didn't have any of her own, it would have to do.

The towel was damp from the humidity in the shower room. Her hair wouldn't dry quickly, and dripped, even though it was short.

A few nearby women stared at her.

She glanced down. Yep, still underdeveloped, and they could tell. They knew she didn't belong here.

"Hey, they are hair dryers over there," one tiny woman said. Though she could walk under Tammy's arm, her face appeared at least mid twenties.

Tammy nodded thanks and walked to the dryers on the wall. They were rigged larger than hand dryers, and not too helpful, though better than a towel. After a few noisy minutes, her hair and shoulders were mostly dry. She dressed hurriedly, and dropped the soiled uniform back in the bag.

The striped shirt was a size too big, and shorts shorter than she cared for. At least they weren't advertising fake fried food, and leaving greasy stains everywhere.

Nancy frowned when she saw Tammy. "Glad you found the dryers. Here, brush your hair." She pulled out a hair brush from deep in her backpack.

Tammy pulled it quickly through her tangles. It wouldn't look nice.

They dropped the bag off in the car and hurried to class.

"What will class be like?"

"Don't you remember school?"

"No. Erin and Kari taught us. Though there was once, long ago. Maybe a few months at a regular school."

Nancy eyed her. "And Kari left this up to me? She trusts us both, or wants us to fail. Come on. Pay attention, be quiet, and take notes. No questions to the professor." She grabbed Tammy's hand and pulled her into a nearby warm building.

"Guess the air is out again. At least we can open the windows here." A woman walked by, keys in hand.

"Professor is in a good mood today." Nancy choose a seat near the front of the room.

Tammy sat beside her and pulled out the book for the class. What would a class be like? School was an almost forgotten dream, from so long ago. Stinky food and noisy kids were her only memories. When had she last been in a school? Maybe ten years ago. It would be fun to observe someone besides Erin teaching.

Nancy pushed the book back. "Take some paper and a pencil. Pretend to pay attention."

Tammy doodled on the page. She had signed up to observe this class with Nancy. It wouldn't be for credit, since she hadn't filled out financial aid paperwork. A class would give her a reason to stay in town and find another job. On campus if possible.

Other students tromped in. They hollered at each other as they sat down.

The professor arrived. Her lecture began as she closed the door behind her.

The words rolled over Tammy's head in fast and furious waves.

Thoughts formed, half heard, maybe from the professor, or students asking questions. Horses, cows, chickens, and food swirled through her brain. Something was missing.

A hand landed on her paper.

She looked up.

"And what is your business plan?"

Tammy gulped.

Nancy looked at her.

What could she say? Their hadn't been time to read the book. "I'd build a restaurant where people watch their food be planted, grown, harvested, and cooked. Vegetables and meat both."

The students laughed.

"No way. You'd let diners watch the butchering of a cow or chicken?"

"No one wants to see that!"

"Food grows in cans and boxes." The girl who sat behind Tammy said.

The rest of the class erupted in laughter.

The girl glanced around the room, as if she had no idea what they were laughing at.

The professor gazed at each laughing student.

The students quieted.

"As you can hear, I don't think we're quite ready for that. Keep trying. I want your full business plans on my desk at this time next week. Class dismissed."

She marched out the door of the room.

In the hustle and bustle of the students leaving the room, Nancy stared at her. "What was that about?"

"She asked me. I said the first thing that came to mind. I had to say something."

Nancy grabbed Tammy's paper. "Erin taught you well. Your drawing isn't bad either."

"It's horses. I miss Genell. I don't think she misses me." Her throat bubbled with unwanted sobs.

"Let's go find Kari." Nancy led the way back across campus.

Kari waited for them by the car.

"Looks like you two had an interesting day."

Tammy smiled. "Sure. I tried to be good. It's not my fault."

"Erin's been teaching her too well. I think Professor took a liking to her project."

"Project? You'll have to tell me more." Kari folded the papers in her hands.

"Later. I'm hungry for real food. Meat and vegetables please." Tammy rested her head on her hand.

"Only if you cook, since you're jobless now," Nancy said.

Kari opened the car door. "Wish you hadn't left your uniform in here."

"I'll take it back to Olly right now." Tammy dropped her pack onto the back seat. She held her nose, picked up the uniform bag with the tips of her fingers, and held it at arm's length.

She hurried back to the restaurant as fast as she could go, not letting the bag touch Nancy's outfit. A group of students came out the door. Tammy brushed past them, and dropped the pile in a heap at Zorina's feet.

Zorina dropped her cloth on the floor.

"Good luck," Tammy said.

Her former coworker picked the cloth up and wiped more crumbs off the table.

Tammy raced back to the car.

Kari and Nancy had their heads together over a piece of paper.

They looked up as she skidded to a stop.

"Where can we go for dinner?"

Nancy shuffled her feet and nodded.

Kari folded up the paper. "How about home?"

Tammy hung her head. "I'll be in trouble. I was supposed to work and help you."

"As depressed as you've been for the last week? You can barely lift your head at dinner. We'll run by the apartment so you can change into your own clothes." Kari stepped away from the side of the car.

"Do I need to take my stuff home?"

Nancy made a strange sound as she reached for her door handle. "Professor wants your business plan next week. What do you think?"

Tammy plopped onto the back seat. "If I go home, she'll be disappointed. If I stay, she'll find out I'm not fully registered for credit in her class."

Kari steered the car through the traffic. "I'd take it. Stay home a few days, do laundry, help Erin. Maybe she can help you develop a business plan."

"We don't have to rush out. I can find a few books for Tammy to take to write her business plan," Nancy said.

"Okay. Maybe we can all stay the night. Plan a party with Erin. I'll call and ask." Kari pulled into the apartment parking spot.

At least she didn't have many things to pack at Kari's.

A business plan sounded like a lot of work. More than she wanted to do.

Chapter 14

Erin's hands fell to her lap as she hung up the phone.

Genell stared.

"Kari is bringing Tammy home now. She hasn't told Tammy."

"I should hope not," Genell said.

"This isn't about you," Erin said. "Tammy has her own troubles. You haven't even asked about her. You used to be her best friend, and know everything she said or did."

Genell grunted and rocked the chair. "She doesn't keep secrets. She'd tell me if anything was wrong."

"She's waited on you to call. Tammy thinks you are at your home. Maybe she has called you. And, she can only tell you what she herself knows."

Genell leaned forward. "What do you know that she doesn't?"

Erin shook her head. "More than you can imagine. If you want to know, I suggest you stay until she gets home tonight, and listen, if she says okay."

"I can't go home right now anyway. Mom would be suspicious. I'm supposed to be watching a movie with Tammy."

As if she wasn't suspicious that Genell hadn't been home in two weeks? Had she even noticed her daughter's absence? Alden hadn't said anything about their mom in his short emails. Only asked how Genell was doing, and if Erin had heard from Tammy. Not even asking how Erin herself was doing.

A cat raced in through the kitchen door with Joe right behind.

"Mark'll be here in a minute. Can we watch a scary movie?"

"How about a family movie?" Aunt Sherry asked.

Joe groaned. "Not something sappy and lovey dovey."

"No, please. How about an adventure?" Genell said.

She had an hour to decide what to do. When Kari arrived with Tammy, she or Genell, would be bound to start an uproar.

Aunt Sherry pushed play on an adventure movie. One about Australia's wildlife.

Mark walked in the door and plopped on the floor beside his brother.

Erin walked up and tapped Aunt Sherry on the shoulder. She nodded and pointed to Grandmother's.

An hour wasn't long. Grandmother wouldn't be expecting her, and it was late. Perhaps she could explain the situation in a hurry. She hurried through the house, closing doors, turning off unnecessary lights, picking up items the boys had dropped. What would they do without her? Dirty socks and a belt she dropped next to the front door. She'd take them upstairs later tonight.

The path to Grandma Jensen's seemed longer at dusk than in daylight. Life had been so simple. A routine she had long enjoyed. Now, it was being shredded so fast, she wasn't sure what pieces she still held. The ones that had fallen were being blown away in the wind spreading Aunt Sherry's family far and wide. In only a few years, the boys too would be adults, and ready to fly away to another place. They wouldn't stay anymore than Kari would come home.

The gate creaked open with a hard shove. It needed to be oiled. Maybe she could sneak back tomorrow night, and oil it. Alden would know what kind to use. If he would tell her.

The stairs popped, and the porch swing swung in the slight breeze. An unrecognized cat stretched lazily on the cushion.

Erin's hands shook as she knocked at the door.

The door creaked open. Light radiated from a bulb swinging three feet below the nine foot tall ceiling.

"Come in," Grandma Jensen said.

Erin followed her in. The hall looked so different at night. Thick drapes had always seemed to keep the sunlight out. At night, shadows lurked across the walls. Cobwebs hung crazily in corners. Wrapped bugs dangled like bulbs from holiday lights. Maybe they were holiday decorations, from some Halloween long past.

Grandma Jensen waddled to her rocking chair by the fireplace in the kitchen. She picked up some knitting as the ever full teapot bubbled on the stove.

"Help yourself. I'll wait."

"Your cup is almost empty." Erin grabbed an empty cup from the sideboard.

"You can refill mine then, after you pour your own."

Always quiet, always waiting. Grandma Jensen never rushed her when she needed to think.

Erin chose some chamomile tea and added a bit of cinnamon before pouring hot water in. She refilled grandma's cup, and the pan, before setting it next to the fire.

"Hope I'm not keeping you up."

Grandma Jensen eyed her over the knitting needles. "I stayed up to see the blue moon rise."

"Maybe that explains all this mess."

"Want to tell me about it?"

Erin stared at her tea as it cooled.

The fire hissed. Knitting needles clicked.

At the moment, what she wanted most was to bury her head on Grandma's lap. To cry and let Grandma make it all better. Tea alone couldn't fix this.

She pushed the tea back, walked over and sat on the dirt covered floor beside Grandma. Her hands clasped around her knees, Erin looked up into her face.

"Tammy is like me. I have to tell her. No one else will."

"You've lived with it. You can help her." The needles clacked on as she rocked.

"She isn't calm like me. What now? Dad will be here in two weeks. Aunt Sherry said I could go to college next year."

"So go."

"If I go, how will Tammy learn? She's been my responsibility so long."

"She's eighteen in two weeks. It's past time. When I was her age, I was married and expected to be providing a home, not be a child. You've trained her well."

"I never taught her how to live gluten free."

"You did. In more ways than you know."

"Genell has been sneaking treats to her. Otherwise it might not have shown up so soon. Kari probably thinks we should have tested her sooner."

"Kari wouldn't have thought of it until she went to college."

Somehow this conversation wasn't helping. Grandma had always been able to help before. Of course, this day had to come. She returned to the table to sip her tea.

An easy silence settled over the kitchen, interrupted only by the clatter of knitting needles and the crackling fire.

After her last sip of tea, Erin rinsed out her cup, and placed another log on the fire. "Is there anything you need Grandma?"

"Another blue skein please. On that shelf over there." She nodded toward a cubby filled with yarn and threads.

She pawed through it, searching for the blue skein. It was hid behind a beige one. "This one?.

Grandma Jensen watched her. "Yes. That's the one. You have grown up so fast."

"What are you making?"

Grandma Jensen stopped rocking. "My eternal shawl."

Erin squeezed the skein. "You'll be alive a long time. I need you."

"Winter is coming. The house is drafty. I can't fix it anymore. It'll be yours." She glared at Erin. "After your no account dad leaves the country again. I need that long to finish the shawl. And you must promise to never let him have any part of this home."

Erin slumped to the floor and cradled the yarn. How could this be? Grandma didn't want to live. "Grandma I can fix the house up. I can live with you."

"Not if you traipse off to college you can't." She sat her knitting down and peered over her glasses at Erin. "And don't go bringing young men here before I die. I don't want to know what happens to my home when I am gone. It won't be mine. It'll be yours."

More confused than ever, Erin stood up. She squeezed the skein of yarn, not realizing she still held it. Tammy thought her world had turned upside down. Tammy still had parents, brothers, a sister. It was she, Erin, who was alone in the world. Sure, she had a dad. One she had never met. Who had never even sent her a birthday card. The odd letter now and then came through, and nothing more.

Tears fell onto the yarn as she twisted it. Not good. Grandma Jensen needed the yarn in good shape. Tears dripped off her nose and onto Grandma's dress as she handed her the skein.

Grandma Jensen patted her arm. "Don't cry dear child. I was old when your mother was born, and she was old when you were born. It is my fault, and hers, that you are an orphan at your age. We were selfish. Don't repeat our mistake."

No man had shown any interest in her. Alden, the only one she liked, didn't like her. She'd likely never marry, or at least follow in the late blooming footsteps of her mother and grandmother.

"Grandma, you can move in with Aunt Sherry this winter, if we can't get your home fixed up. You can have my side of my room. I'm sure Tammy won't mind."

Grandma Jensen cackled. "Sherry would let me stay. Child, I'd never make it up the stairs. I can't even get off the porch here anymore. These will be my last herbs."

"Don't give up, Grandma. I need you."

"I'm sorry. I'm almost old enough to be your great great grandma. I've held on as long as I can."

The needles stopped clicking. "Go now, and rest. Bring me flowers when you can to brighten my days."

Erin ran out of the warm kitchen, her eyes heavy with tears. She slammed the front door and raced to the gate. As it creaked shut, the tears flooded her face. A chilly breeze blew from the north.

Chapter 15

Tammy held her backpack close. The suitcase banged against her leg as the vehicle slid along the curvy road. Her stomach lurched, and her head swum. Closing her eyes didn't help.

"Kari, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Mom and Erin are waiting on us." Kari barely slowed for a stop sign.

Nancy didn't make a sound.

Tammy held her suitcase close. Kari had always been the safest driver she knew, even safer than their mom and dad. Her suitcase slid and banged her knees. There weren't many worldly possessions in it. She didn't want to lose any in her sister's car. Something had to be wrong.

"Nancy?" Kari asked.

"I'm here."

Kari slowed for the turn into the driveway. She parked in front of the house. "Tammy wait out here. I'll be right back."

Kari and Nancy left Tammy in the car and hurried up onto the porch.

A few minutes to catch her breath.

The front door opened. Mark, Joe, and Yapper ran out to the porch swing.

"Come on Tammy," Kari yelled from the door.

Tammy grabbed her belongings and hurried past her brothers.

The kitchen light shone bright. Home had never felt so good. She dropped her backpack and suitcase by the door and joined Nancy and Kari at the table.

"Erin will be in, in a few minutes." Kari spooned food onto a plate and pushed it to Tammy.

At least it was Erin's cooking. Baked chicken, peas, and carrots. A few bites, and her stomach felt full. She pushed the rest of the peas and carrots around, not looking up at her sister and Nancy.

The kitchen door opened.

"Glad you're home." Her mom walked over to the table.

Erin followed her and started some tea.

Genell waltzed in, plopped in a chair, and glared at Tammy.

Tammy gulped. Not good. Genell never visited when Tammy had been visiting her sister before.

"You okay?"

"You never called."

"You were mad at me."

"Still am."

Erin turned from the stove. "Genell, Tammy, please wait until Kari and Nancy finish eating."

Tammy waited.

Erin brought her warm mint tea. "Should help you relax."

Kari ate her last bite of chicken, pushed the plate forward, and glanced at Nancy.

Nancy nodded and pushed her empty plate forward.

Kari pulled out a folded paper and handed it to Erin.

Erin glanced at the contents and turned to Tammy.

"I have tried to teach you so much. I never thought this would happen."

"What?" Tammy said.

"Do you know why meals here are different than at Genell's?"

Tammy shook her head.

"Tell me what is different."

Tammy stared at the table. Yes, something was different. Here, the food was cooked well. However, they never ate fried food, and almost never ate bread of any type. In fact, she couldn't remember the last birthday cake she had. It was almost her birthday again, if they had a party this year. Erin had given up parties years ago.

"Genell always has biscuits, rolls, breads of all kinds, and cookies."

Erin nodded. "Do you know why we don't?"

Tammy shook her head. "I go to Genell's for snacks."

"You've been doing that a lot the last year, haven't you? Then coming home and picking at your meals."

Tammy nodded.

"Promise me, you won't eat another bit of bread, until you understand."

"Why not?" She had a cinnamon bun hidden in her backpack for later.

"How stupid!" Genell said. "She needs bread to grow muscles. You barely feed her at all."

Erin glared at Genell.

"This is my fault. I should have done more," her mom said.

"What is there to understand? You don't like bread, so you don't fix it." Genell glared at Erin.

"No," Erin said. "Once I liked it."

She turned to Tammy and clasped her hands. "Tell me the symptoms you told the doctor at the clinic."

Tammy glanced round the room, and pulled her hands free. She thought back to the list of symptoms. "I'm full all the time, tired, don't really want to eat. I feel full even in my brain, if that makes sense. It doesn't want to think. I've said some stupid things, I know. That's normal for almost eighteen, isn't it?"

Erin shook her head.

"Tammy, I faced gluten intolerance at fourteen. Not sure if you remember those experiences."

Tammy tried to think. The exhaustion and the stress of the day had been too much. "That was the year we moved here, right?"

Erin nodded. "I couldn't go to school anymore. School lunches were mostly breaded. There was too much risk of someone dropping bread in my home prepared lunches, and no safe way to take meat and vegetables. It would spill, or spoil before lunch time."

"So you dropped out of school because you were afraid of bread?" Genell said. "How silly."

Erin glanced at her. "It's not a fear Genell. It's serious. While a grain of bread won't kill me instantly, it will cause serious health problems. Health problems that can lead to death."

Genell slammed her fist on the table. "No it won't! You've starved me every time I've come to visit. No one bakes meat, other than you. There is no bread to sop up the vegetables. I can't eat that slop!" She slammed her fist on the table until the plates danced.

"You don't have to."

"Look at Tammy! She is starving to death. I bet I could see her ribs, if her shirt were tighter." Genell breathed hard.

"Losing weight is a symptom of gluten intolerance," Erin said.

"How much weight have you lost in the last year?" Erin looked at Tammy.

The last year. In fact, this shirt had fit more snug last spring. No wonder her clothes were so worn out. She hadn't outgrown anything in over a year, or was it two? "I haven't gained any."

"And if we don't get you fattened up a bit, you'll miss your last growth spurt," Genell said. "You need to stay with me. My mom will feed you all you can eat as many times a day as possible."

Erin sighed. "Genell, that is the last thing she needs. The blood results are positive. Tammy cannot have anymore gluten filled foods. No bread!"

"She'll starve!"

Erin nodded. "Yes, she is starving now. Do you know why?"

"She isn't eating enough." Genell leaned back in her chair.

"Correct. She ate half her dinner tonight. Do you know why?"

"Nothing appetizing in that meal."

Tammy stared at the plate of peas and carrots. The peas and carrots wouldn't go down. Her favorite vegetables. The chicken tasted odd, not quite slimy. She touched her fork. A pea flew across the room.

"I'm full, and feel yucky," Tammy said. "Olly fired me, that's all.

"It's not that easy." Erin stood up and walked to the sink. She picked up a dish cloth, held it like a pouch, and ran the water into it. "Watch this."

The pouch filled, leaking through the bottom. Once it was to the top, she turned the water off. "This is what is happening inside Tammy's stomach, and mine, if I eat bread.

The rag held the water at first. Slowly, drop by drop, it leaked through, dripping into the sink.

"Those drips are nutrients and other particles leaking through our stomach walls. Our body fights the invading microscopic particles, leading to exhaustion, and no nutrient value is received by them."

"No, that can't be true. I learned in school, how the stomach digests food. The food is supposed to be absorbed through the stomach." Genell glared at Erin.

"Leaky gut doesn't always occur with celiac does it?" Nancy sat her cup down.

Erin turned to Kari. "You would know better than me."

Kari sighed. "Not always. It depends on many things, including how damaged the lining of the stomach and intestines are. In my

opinion, leaky gut would occur after continued exposure to gluten containing products. Will it ever fully recover? We don't know. I don't want this diagnosis for my sister."

"Do you have it?" Tammy asked.

Kari shook her head. "No. However, it can develop later in life, and I tend to eat fewer gluten foods than I think you have in the last year."

Tammy nodded. "I ate at Genell's at least once a day, it seemed."

"And I sent food, real food, home with you," Genell said.

"So, I have to eat only like Erin does?"

Kari reached for her hand. "It's more than that. So many things, stamps, shampoo, medications, cleaning gloves, and animal food often contain gluten."

"Is that why you never feed the farm animals?"

Erin nodded. "The risk isn't worth it. Gluten can be absorbed through the skin, or breathed in through the nose. I have to be careful, and so do you."

Tammy gulped. At least she knew how to cook the things Erin had taught her. It wasn't much. Meat and vegetables. A future of meals that she had always known. No traveling the world and tasting the treats of various cultures.

"If you're going to starve Tammy, I want to go home now. I won't be back," Genell said.

"She won't starve. The weight will come back."

"How soon?" The plate of food she had barely touched had once been her favorite meal. She wanted to enjoy it again.

"I don't know. It may be weeks, months, or years." Erin turned away.

Not before Tammy saw that her cheek glistened. Erin never cried.

"My bag is upstairs. I'll get it and go home. For good." Genell tromped off, holding her stomach.

"Fine. I'll drive you home." Nancy grabbed Kari's keys and walked out the door.

Genell stormed after her.

"I'll have to stay home, won't I?" Tammy said.

"For a few days." Erin sat down.

"Better take my things upstairs." Tammy stood up and grabbed her backpack.

"Erin will I still share you room?"

Erin smiled. "I think that would be a good idea for a few weeks. With company coming, and all."

Chapter 16

Tammy moved slowly, and hefted the almost empty backpack as if it weighed a hundred pounds. The suitcase banged each step as she climbed.

Erin waited until Tammy's footsteps echoed above them. "It's going to be difficult."

"What can I do?" Kari asked.

There wasn't really anything for Kari to do.

Aunt Sherry let Yapper out for a late night run around the farm.

Kari waited on her answer.

"Aunt Sherry?"

She turned from the door.

The phone rang. Erin scowled at the number as she answered. "Hello?"

"Erin, it's Pandy! Get here quick!"

"Where?"

"Mare Valley. Genell killed Ultimate. She's bleeding."

"Let's go!" Erin dropped the phone on the receiver.

"Tammy?" Aunt Sherry said.

"Leave her with the boys." Erin grabbed Aunt Sherry's keys and her purse. The door slammed shut behind her.

The key turned the engine as Kari and Aunt Sherry climbed in.

Erin shoved the car in reverse, turned, and raced out of the driveway.

Sirens blared and lights flashed at the driveway to Mare Valley. A fire truck, and two ambulances raced in ahead of them. Reminiscent of the night Mr. Farlan had a heart attack. If only he had still been alive, Genell would have gone to him, and not given up the unborn child. This might never have happened.

She parked and ran up to the blaring lights. The mangled remains of Kari's car reflected the flashing lights of the fire truck and ambulances.

The front of Kari's car was crushed by the broken body of Ultimate the stallion, father of Lilly's babies. His tongue lolled, legs and chest shattered.

Kari rushed to the paramedics by the driver's side of her car, or what was left of it. Nancy would have to be rescued by pulling the top of the car off of her.

The passenger side and Genell looked worse. Genell's head hung out the window. Her arm's sprawled inside. Blood dripped from her head to a dark pool below the door. The roof of the car was crushed between her and Nancy.

Mrs. Farlan wrung her hands nearby, mumbling.

Pandy limped over to her. Alden steadied the veterinarian technician.

"What happened?"

Pandy struggled to stay upright.

The flashing lights flickered eerily as paramedics worked to rescue Nancy and Genell.

"I was moving Ultimate from the breeding pen to his own pasture. The car was coming along at a normal speed. I didn't recognize it, so I stopped before crossing the driveway."

Pandy sobbed. "It suddenly jerked right for me. I pulled Ultimate away. Not fast enough."

Erin hugged her. "There was nothing you could do. If only we had kept her at our place a few more minutes."

Alden looked across Pandy directly at Erin. He had to be thinking what she was thinking. Genell had given up the will to live. And taken Ultimate with her. Perhaps she could have reconciled with Tammy, if not for the news Tammy must live gluten free forever. To have been abandoned by her father in death, her mother in work, the baby she never knew, the boyfriend who disappeared, and the apparent rejection by her former best friend due to food allergies. No wonder she had no energy to recover.

Genell's loss was as great in many ways as her own. Though the pain in her chest was as much for Tammy, and how she would take the news as it was for the loss of Genell.

"Is Genell?"

Pandy shook her head.

"Did she say anything?"

Metal groaned as the roof of the car off was ripped off.

"Lies. Her last words were 'they all lied'." Pandy hid her head on Alden's shoulder.

How Erin longed to do just that. Forever.

"Can you please move away now," the paramedic touched her arm.

Erin followed Alden and Pandy over to Mrs. Farlan.

Nancy was pulled from the vehicle and placed on a stretcher.

Erin turned away from the flashing lights.

"They are pulling Genell out now," Alden whispered.

She turned back and watched.

EMS were gentle, though not as gentle as if she were alive. She was placed on the stretcher. They covered her completely with a sheet.

Mrs. Farlan walked up wringing her hands, and pulled the sheet back to see the bloody face. "She didn't have to die. Why?"

"I'll never tell. No need now." Alden took Erin's hand.

Aunt Sherry led Genell and Mrs. Farlan back into the house.

"I'm going with Nancy. Be careful." Kari ran back to the waiting ambulance and climbed inside.

Sirens blared. The ambulance raced away with Kari and Nancy.

The second one carrying Genell's body, left at a more sedate pace, without flashing lights.

Several farm workers had gathered around.

The fire trucks followed the ambulances down the drive.

"Get a tractor," one of the farm hands said. "No one can get in or out now."

"Aunt Sherry's car!"

"Hush. She moved it into Ultimate's field as soon as you ran up here," Alden said.

A tractor pulled up slowly and lifted the majority of the remains of the shattered car. The driver backed it up, and turned off into Ultimate's field, to set the vehicle down next to Aunt Sherry's.

The driver came back. "I hate to do this," he said.

"You have to." Alden let go of Pandy. "I'll help."

Pandy sniffed. "Let me help to."

Erin held Ultimate's head, and closed his eyes.

It took everyone who could gather around to lift his body enough for the tractor to get the tines under him. The driver lifted the body slowly, only about two feet, and drove off to the machinery barn.

Alden wrapped one arm around her shoulder, and one around Pandy, to walk back to the house. For a moment, she could dream of his holding her close. Only for a moment.

Corey sprawled on the porch, sobbing into Choco's fur.

He was alone. No father, and no sister. His mother ignored him. His older brother too busy running Mare Valley to be there for him. She'd make sure Mark and Joe spent more time here with him. For a while, at least.

Chapter 17

Tammy jumped when the kitchen door slammed.

She raced to the window.

Her mom and Kari jumped into the car and it took off. Erin had to be driving.

The television in Joe and Mark's room babbled on as they prepared for bed.

Tammy burst in on them.

"Hey, you didn't knock!" Joe's shirt was off and his pajama top crumpled beside him on the bed.

"I don't care." Tammy pulled Mark, already in pajamas, up from his bed.

"Put your shirt on. And shoes, we have to go. Now!"

They grumbled and stumbled into their shoes as she shut off the TV.

She raced down the stairs and waited on them, tapping her foot.

The boys moseyed along, laughing and throwing things. "Where are we going?"

Sirens blared in the distance.

"Follow the sirens. They have to be going to Mare Valley."

"Mom won't want us out this late," Mark said. "We have to be in bed by dark."

Tammy grabbed his arm and pushed him towards the door. "She, Erin, and Kari drove over there, kicking dust. Nancy took Genell home. We have to know what happened. I can't leave you home alone."

Mark pulled away from her and raced to the gate.

"Wait. We have to stay together." Tammy shut the door behind Joe.

The dark pathway flickered with shadows.

Fear pounded as loudly as their feet down the trail. Almost invisible sticks and rocks tripped them, even on the well known know path.

They reached the mare barn, panting. Beyond it, the fire truck and two ambulances blinked onto a scene of people and mangled metal.

People stood everywhere.

Tammy pulled the boys close. They shouldn't see this. She should take them back home.

Nancy was a safe driver. Corey was known to hide on the side of the drive to jump out and scare people. If she had hit him, she'd never forgive herself.

Corey wasn't visible.

She moved closer, staying out of the flashing lights. Mark and Joe stayed right against her sides.

Red lights flashed on and off Genell's bloody face as it stuck out of the window. Her eyes stared skyward, unseeing.

Erin, Pandy, and Alden stood nearby, not even trying to talk to Genell.

A dark object was crushed under the tangled hood of Kari's car.

Tammy gulped.

Joe whimpered.

She pulled him and Mark close. "Come on. We have to find Corey. He'll be in one of the barns."

Corey had to be here somewhere.

Joe and Mark could comfort him.

Genell had been her friend so long, she couldn't let her go without saying goodbye. She had to know if Nancy was safe. Especially now. Nancy had been there for her when she needed her most.

She pulled the boys away and ran to the stallion barn. Tammy pushed the door open and pulled Mark and Joe inside.

The horses rustled and nibbled on hay uneasily. The nearest stallion sloshed water out of the door and sprayed Mark in the face.

Tammy sat on a hay pile and pulled Mark and Joe close beside her.

"What's wrong with Genell?" Joe asked.

"I don't know." If anything happened to Nancy, Kari would be devastated. If Kari were devastated, who would she have to turn to? Erin had her own issues now, and would be leaving soon.

"We have to go see," Mark said.

"We shouldn't have come," Tammy whispered. "Let's go look for Corey."

They searched through the barn, calling into the stallion's stalls. No sign of him in this barn.

Outside, they tried to stay out of view of the group around the ambulances. The ambulances drove off. The first on quickly, and blaring. The second more slowly.

Mark made a sound and pulled Joe close.

Tammy wanted to run and find her sister. Kari didn't appear in the crowd.

One of the farm workers walked their way.

She pulled Mark and Joe behind a mare barn.

The worker took the tractor from the nearby machinery barn.

They hurried through the mare barn searching for Corey. He had to be somewhere. He wasn't in that mess of people, not with his mother.

Joe and Mark couldn't be left by themselves. Once they found Corey, she'd find Kari.

The sound of the tractor coming back broke her train of thought as she stood outside the machinery barn.

She ducked around the corner, pulling the boys with her.

The worker parked outside and walked back to the house.

"Stay here," she whispered.

"Don't go without us," Joe said.

"I have to know what he brought over here. Please wait."

They nodded.

She slipped across to the tractor and walked to the tines. Her eyes closed at the sight of blood and caked dirt. Fists clenched, she brought her hands to her face.

A deep breath, later, and she opened her eyes.

There lay the broken body of Ultimate. His desire for Lilly, breaking into her pen when Genell didn't want her bred, had caused him to pay the ultimate price.

A lock of mane hung undamaged.

Tammy picked up a sharp rock, cut a few hairs, and stuffed them in her pocket. She returned to her brothers.

Mark and Joe mustn't see the recognition and pain in her eyes. Her dry throat struggled to hold back tears. "Everyone's gone inside. We better join them. If mom calls, we aren't home to answer the phone."

Mark took one hand and held Joe by the other. He pulled them toward the house.

In the shadows of the porch, Corey pounded a cushion next to Choco.

"Stay with Corey," Tammy said.

Mark nodded and pulled Joe with him to Corey.

Tammy lingered a moment.

Corey needed her too.

Kari had to be somewhere close.

She pushed through the door and bounced right off of Alden.

"Slow down. Tammy, you okay."

She gulped.

The front room was stuffed with people milling around. Everyone turned to stare.

"Sorry Alden. Where's Kari? Is Nancy okay? Genell."

Alden took her hand and led her to a side room. "We don't know. Nancy lost a lot of blood. Genell."

"I saw no one by her. I pulled the boys away."

"Joe and Mark are with you?"

"They are outside with Corey."

Alden hugged her close, "What a relief. Thanks Tammy. We better go find Erin and your mom. They are probably in the kitchen."

He pushed the door open.

The crowded kitchen wafted waves of heat. Fried chicken piled high on a platter near corn bread cakes from the farm worker's dinner.

Genell's mom busied herself pulling plates from counters and setting the table.

Alden handed her a chicken leg. "Your favorite."

What could she do? It was her favorite. Surely one more night of comfort food wouldn't hurt. Genell's mom's fried chicken always tasted perfect. Not like the greasy mess at the Clucker. She took a bite.

Erin walked up to her. "Tonight. Then we'll explain," she whispered.

The chicken tasted sour. Tammy nodded.

"I'll be right back." She ran out the kitchen door and raced around the wrap around porch. At the front of the house she called for Choco.

He waddled up to her. Choco chomped down on the chicken leg dangling from her fingers.

She rubbed his fur. Tears slipped down her cheeks. What a summer. Lilly died. Her best friend ignored her, and then died. No more food treats anymore. Her favorite stallion had been killed. Her mind swirled in pain.

Alden's hand slipped under hers. "Why don't we go see Flora?"

Tammy nodded.

Near the steps, Corey, Joe and Mark chatted. Maybe playing a game.

She and Alden walked to the nursing foal barn.

He pushed open the door. "Erin told me. Sorry to ask you to eat something you can't have."

Tammy swallowed. "How does she reject food from your mom? I thought she used to eat here some too."

"That was a long time ago. Mom cooked different then. She has to cook what the farm hands want and thinks gives them the most energy to get through the day. Or, thinks she does. I miss baked food too."

Flora nickered at them through the gate.

Tammy reached out to touch her velvety nose.

"Guess she is yours now. Leave her here a while though, okay? She'll need her second mother."

Tammy slipped the door open, slid in, and let it shut behind her. Hers? Not really. The show papers had only had Genell's name on them.

Alden was being helpful. Tonight though, she needed the comfort of the closest thing to Genell, and her childhood. It was slipping away. As Genell's life had slipped from her bloody face.

Chapter 18

Erin slipped out of the kitchen a moment.

Choco gnawed the bone Tammy had given her. She should have known better than to give bones to a dog. Erin petted Choco. They way he gnawed at the bone, they were common in his diet. If it splintered, it could be serious. The Farlan family didn't need anymore grief. She distracted Choco and took the bone away.

Alden and Tammy walked down the lane to the mare barn.

Tears couldn't come. She wouldn't let them. Of course, everyone would assume she was crying for Genell. She had to stay strong for Mrs. Farlan. The boys needed her more than Choco at the moment.

"Erin," Joe said. "Is Nancy going to be okay?"

"We'll know when Kari knows." She sat behind the boys.

"Corey, you okay?"

He nodded.

Beams of light streamed out through the windows.

His tear streaked face showed his emotions.

"Mark, Joe, why don't you go get something to drink, and bring Corey something as well."

Mark and Joe patted Corey on the shoulder as they stood up.

"I'll be right back," Mark said.

As soon as the brothers were out of sight, Corey slid over next to her.

Erin hugged him. He was one of the young boys to her. If only Alden would hug her.

"Hey," Mark yelled as the kitchen door slammed. "No need to run."

Corey slid back to his spot away from Erin.

She grinned.

Mark understood Corey couldn't be seen being comforted like a small child.

Joe ran up to Corey and handed him a glass of water. "Mom's making lemonade, if you want that."

Corey shook his head and took the glass.

"Let me know if you need anything." Erin stood up.

Alden and Tammy hadn't returned. She walked down the lane to the barn.

Inside, Alden sat on an upturned bucket by the door.

"Hi."

"Tammy's with Flora," he whispered.

Erin nodded and sat beside him. Sometimes, sitting near someone was all she could do. Her hand reached for his.

He smiled. "I'll be okay. I'm worried about Tammy. Will she blame herself?"

"It's not her fault. If anything, it's Bain's."

"I know that, and you know that. Does she? Mom takes a good deal of the blame too. She has changed so much since dad died."

She wanted to reach out and hold his hand. Anything to comfort him. Her shoulder brushed against his.

Alden leaned back.

At least he hadn't pushed her away. That meant something to her anyway.

Tammy stepped out of the stall and the door clicked shut. "Ready to go home."

Erin held her arms out.

She ran into them and let Erin held her close, as she had when she was a small child. This might be the last time. The ache in her chest must be what Aunt Sherry felt as each of them had grown up.

Alden's eyes glistened. His hand moved on his lap.

He'd keep his promise. He wouldn't comfort Tammy more than he had. Not tonight. Though he longed to. Now, and forever. She had to admit, if he hugged Tammy tonight, she wouldn't hold it against him, or his promise. He was almost family, after all.

Erin's tears mingled with Tammy's. Loss was too small a word for the pain in her heart.

Chapter 19

The stuffed horse hit the wall and fell on Erin's prim and proper bed. It ruffled her blanket.

Tammy buried her head in her pillow. The uncontrollable hot dry tears had to stop. She couldn't go downstairs with a red face.

A door slammed down the hall. "Race you down the stairs!" Joe shouted. His footsteps disappeared downward.

Mark's footsteps slowed outside the door. "Tammy, you coming?"

She didn't move.

He opened the door and peeked inside. "Tammy?"

"I can't can I? Genell's mom doesn't want me there."

"Corey and Alden expect you there. As do Pandy and Miranda. Come on before Erin comes up."

"Mark!" Joe's voice bounced up and down the hall.

He closed the door. "Okay. Mom and Dad can't leave yet anyway." His footsteps echoed down the hall.

Tammy wiped away the tears. Erin would expect her to go. And, she'd be there to answer questions. It was a strange new world, this gluten free world. Although, technically, she'd always lived it at home.

Soon, she'd have to learn all of it herself. Erin would be gone.

Her hands clutched the pillow tighter as she stood up. She pulled the rumpled sheet up to the where the pillow should be before she placed it on the bed. It still had that strange smell, not quite Genell's usual smell on the sheets. Erin wouldn't tell her why the odor was wrong.

She dressed in an outfit Erin had carefully laid aside for her. The shoes were almost too small. Though, too small felt right, right about now. Too much had changed. As if she had out grown home, and like the fledgling, was being pushed from her nest before she had learned to fly. She'd have to learn to fly on her way down. Would she be able to swoop back up and join those who remained in the branches? Or would she plummet too fast, as Erin's whispered words had said Genell did?

"Tammy?" Erin's voice crept up the stairs.

"I'll be there." Tammy picked up her horse and sat it beside the picture of Genell, her, and Lilly. Somehow, she'd pull out of the nosedive, in memory. Flora needed her.

She pushed back her hair before she ran down the stairs.

Mark and Joe stopped arguing as she walked in the kitchen. They never did that. Had they changed too?

Her usual quick humor escaped her. She held her head up and walked for the door.

"Chicken," Joe said.

"She's not," Mark said.

"If I were a chicken, I'd peck you both and chase you all the way to Mare Valley!" Tammy slammed the door. She ran to the car before the tears slipped down her cheeks. If she were a chicken, she would be safely fluttering with her family, not floundering while trying to learn to fly, as people left her one by one. First Kari, now Genell, soon Erin, and maybe Nancy.

Erin and her mother joined her.

"The boys will ride with Dad," Mom said.

Tammy nodded. It was nice to be alone in the backseat.

The drive to Mare Valley was slower than normal. Not that it ever took long. This time, everything stood out in stark contrast. The fields waved in a gentle breeze as if saying goodbye. Horses stood, not even eating as the car drove into Mare Valley.

Erin parked next to Alden's car. "Ultimate's burial will be simple. Alden sent Corey to find some flowers."

"Ultimate was a stallion, not a mare."

"He won the roses, and many other floral races, didn't he?"

He had.

"Okay. Guess I'll need to find some for him." She opened the door and stepped out.

Corey stood nearby. He handed her a handful of pasture flowers, and Ultimate's favorite hay. "Figured you'd like this for him." He blinked.

"Thank you." She closed her eyes. Tammy could almost smell the sun warming the pasture field, and hear Ultimate munching on the hay. She opened her eyes to Flora blowing her nose in front of her.

Alden laughed gently. "Figured she should see her father buried. Not sure she ever saw him in life. We always thought there would be plenty of time." He handed Tammy the lead rope.

Tammy led Flora to the place picked out for Ultimate's grave. He had sired many foals for Mare Valley. He was, had been, their prime stallion. "Will you enjoy these bouquet as much as your father?" She held the flowers and hay out to Flora.

Flora nibbled and sniffed it. Then she sneezed.

Tammy smiled. Flora could lift her heart, and maybe her wings given enough time.

She placed the flowers gently on Ultimate's neck.

Joe and Mark talked incessantly about how Ultimate's genetic line was lost. Which didn't matter at all. He had sired many colts and fillies.

Pandy and Miranda also added flowers.

Other farm workers she had known as long as she could remember stayed behind to fill in Ultimate's grave.

She led Flora away to her stall.

Erin followed Tammy. "She'll be okay."

"I know. It's not her I worry about." Tammy patted Flora and the mare who was raising her, before closing the stall door. "It's Nancy. And Pandy. Even Miranda hurts from Ultimate's death."

Tammy leaned against the stall door. "If Nancy doesn't recover, Kari may never come home. She won't like me anymore."

Erin held out her arms. "She'll come home. Kari knows it isn't your fault. Nancy will be home with us soon. Let's go in. Mrs. Farlan is waiting for us."

"She really don't like me." Tammy hurried to the door. Best to get it over with, before Genell's funeral. After that, she'd know if Mrs. Farlan would welcome her back to Mare Valley.

Tammy's hands trembled on the porch door to the kitchen. She hadn't been in since the night Genell died.

Alden opened it for her. "Come on in Tammy."

A red-faced Mrs. Farlan turned from the counter. "Oh there you are. Since you won't eat fried chicken anymore, here spread it around to the guests." She plopped a heavy platter of greasy chicken on Tammy's arms.

Alden rescued it from slipping to the floor. "Don't worry come on." He led her through the kitchen and into the front room. Most of the farm workers had gathered there for lunch.

"Flora is doing well," Miranda said. "Do you plan to show her?"

All due to Alden's care, as she had barely been there. "I don't know. That's up to Alden now isn't it?"

He held the tray out to the man who had removed Ultimate's body. "Nope. Up to you."

"She'll not be here after today if she refuses the generosity of this farm." Genell's mother stood in the doorway to the kitchen waving a wooden spoon.

"Tammy has never refused the generosity of our home." Alden handed the platter to another farm hand.

"Refusing to eat the food I cook is refusing my generosity."

Heat flushed. Her hands clenched. What could she say?

Alden touched her shoulder. "Give her time."

"Mrs. Farlan, may we have some more lemonade," Miranda yelled.

Genell's mother stormed off into the kitchen.

Tammy blinked. "I don't know what to do." That she could say these horrible things in front of everyone Tammy had known for her entire life stung. Almost as much as the tears she struggled to blink back.

"We will figure it out." Miranda leaned toward her.

Alden stood behind her, blocking her view of his mother.

Her mood swings had been horrid for months. She had even brought tears to Genell's eyes a time or two with her stinging replies.

"I need to find Erin."

"She's outside," Pandy said. "Please come back soon."

"Not here. Not to the house." Tammy ran out the front door without closing it

Chapter 20

The next few days flew by in haze. At the time, they dragged, every minute an hour long as they waited for this call, or that call. Always waiting on others to make decisions at a glacial pace. On the outside, looking in. Erin didn't know what to do to comfort Tammy.

The day of Genell's funeral dawned clear and humid.

Only a few of the farm workers would attend Genell's funeral. They couldn't leave the farm chores undone. Pandy and Miranda would be there.

Alden insisted Tammy sit with his family, as she was Genell's best friend, and stayed with them as much as at home.

His mother glared as Tammy sat between Alden and Corey.

The funeral droned on.

Mrs. Farlan seemed to be the only person holding back her tears. Surely, she couldn't be so cold to her only daughter. What had happened between her and her daughter to destroy their relationship?

Kari slipped into the seat beside her. "Nancy is coming home this afternoon."

Nancy had escaped with a broken arm, collar bone, and internal bruising. It would be a long recovery. It meant more work for Erin, because Nancy had nowhere else to go. Her family had rejected her.

Aunt Sherry had spoken with Nancy and Kari alone at the hospital.

"Is your room ready?"

"I brought a few things from the apartment." Kari wrung her hands in her lap.

It was no secret that Aunt Sherry had been sad about her daughter's choice.

Finally, it was time to walk by the casket.

Mrs. Farlan did not place a flower on Genell's casket.

Erin sighed as she did place one there. Even though she had never been close to Genell, she knew what tragic events had occurred the last few months of her life. Even so, there was nothing more tragic than her own mother's rejection of her now, even in

death. Someday, she would regret it. Hopefully, that day would come before she lost Alden and Corey too.

Her hand clasped the keepsake rose. A thorn pricked her skin. The red blood matched the color of the rose. Her father may have been no different. And now, he was going to make amends before it was too late. Something Mrs. Farlan could never do for Genell. The least she could do was listen.

She turned and followed Kari to the parked cars.

"I'll be back with Nancy in a few hours." Kari opened the door of the rental car and stared at the open grave.

She had lost something that night too. And almost lost so much more.

"We will be ready."

"I know." Kari turned to her. "Tammy needs you."

Mark and Joe ran by and jumped into Aunt Sherry's car.

Tammy stood by Genell's grave. Not moving.

Erin started that way.

Alden walked over to Tammy and handed her something.

Her heart fluttered and sank. Nope. Nothing had changed.

Mrs. Farlan glared at Alden and Tammy.

"Hey, take us home!" Mark shouted.

Alden and Tammy turned toward the cars. He walked with her, not quite touching, and opened the front passenger door for her.

Erin blinked the mist from her eyes.

Aunt Sherry drove Genell's family home.

The drive home was quiet. Tammy sat beside her deep in thought. Even Joe and Mark didn't argue. Once home, the boys rushed off to visit their cow, complaining it hadn't been led around the farm enough.

Tammy stayed in her seat.

Erin waited.

"Why doesn't mom like Nancy? She's a big help, and a lot of fun."

Erin sighed. "Normally, I'd say don't ever keep a secret. Can you keep one for a few weeks?"

Tammy nodded.

Erin looked at the roof of the car trying to determine how to explain to Tammy. She had lived with Nancy and Kari a few weeks, so she knew something was different about their relationship.

"You mom wanted to give them time to be sure they wanted to be in a relationship together. Sometimes relationships last, sometimes they don't. Do you understand?"

Tammy nodded. "They joke, tease, and seem to read each others minds. I don't resent Nancy, though she seems almost closer to Kari than me now."

Erin nodded. "Sometime, when things calm down, your mom will explain to Joe and Mark. Don't think of it as a secret so much, as waiting until the boys can understand."

"Did mom want me to go stay with Kari?"

Erin laughed. "She figured you knew, or would find out. It was a safe way for you to explore college and have people she trusted for you to be with at night."

"Is she afraid I will be like Kari?"

Tammy could be counted on to always see what Erin missed. Perhaps that was one reason Aunt Sherry had withdrawn so much from her own daughters. Wasn't it only herself, who had never been in a visible relationship?

"I don't know. Don't worry about it. Let's go make Kari's room ready for Nancy. Hope you aren't too hurt about not having your own room."

"Kari doesn't want to stay on the farm. I wondered why."

"She won't have children to inherit it. Not easily anyway." Erin closed the car door.

"Guess that's why she wants to be geneticist. She'll go away for good someday. I'm glad mom is giving me the summer with her. I'll miss her." Tammy closed her car door and ran up the steps.

If Kari went away, she'd follow her. After all, Kari was as much her friend as Genell had been Tammy's. Someday, she'd find someone. Although, it'd leave her grandmother's place empty if she left.

Erin unlocked the door.

"Where will your dad, his wife, and kids stay?" Tammy opened the door.

Yapper raced out and bounded down the steps.

Erin closed her eyes. Tammy raced through life, always one step ahead. Another problem to confront. If only Grandma Jensen would be forgiving. Just once, please. "I don't know."

Chapter 21

Tammy ran up the stairs to Kari and Nancy's room.

At least Erin wasn't part of a couple. Maybe she wouldn't leave for a long time, even with college in the future. Mrs. Jensen's place would be a nice place for Erin to come home to.

She fluffed the pillows.

Erin had turned gentle music on across the hall in their room. Normally, it would grate on her nerves. Not today.

Neither Erin, nor Kari, should leave. Without them, she would only have her pesky brothers to keep her company. Unless she went to visit Corey.

Or, creepy Alden.

Maybe he wasn't so creepy though. He had been taken care of Flora for her.

She settled back on the bed Nancy would sleep in. Alden had stood close to her when Ultimate was buried. He even stood in front of her when tears trickled down her cheeks so no one else would see them.

Corey had been stoney faced across the horse's grave.

Workers lowered Ultimate's body down. Flowers and hay made a warm layer to protect his body from the incoming dirt.

Mrs. Jensen had sent a sprig of mint for Erin to place in his grave. And then her comments to Tammy afterwards had stung worse than the summer a whole hornet's nest had chased her.

Mrs. Farlan had been so cold and rude at her daughter's funeral.

As the family walked back to the car after Genell's funeral, Tammy had lingered.

Alden waited nearby, not talking.

Corey's silence cut like knife. He had refused to look at her, as if it were her fault Ultimate, and Genell, were dead.

Alden's silence felt more like Mrs. Jensen's. As if he were near, waiting on her. Not demanding, not asking, not questioning.

Tires crunched on gravel.

A door clicked. Erin padded down the stairs.

The egg yellow car was out of place among the darker colored car and truck her parents drove.

Rather than be in the way, she'd wait. Her hands clenched the windowsill.

Kari and Erin helped Nancy out of the car.

Nancy wore a neck brace, and moved slowly between Kari and Erin.

Tammy pulled the covers back on Nancy's bed, so she could climb right in. She bounced about while Nancy hobbled up the stairs between Kari and Erin.

Yapper followed silently behind. His tail wagged. Nose on the back of Nancy's right leg.

As soon as Nancy was on the landing, Tammy ran to hug her. "Glad you came home Nancy."

Nancy smiled and patted her back with her left arm. "And have you written your business proposal? You have to turn both of ours in tomorrow, you know."

Tammy's jaw dropped. Professor expected a full fledged business proposal tomorrow. Ugh. Even if she had had time, there was no way she could have had the heart, or energy, for it over the last few days.

"Guess you'll have to help me?" Tammy helped her down the hall with Kari and Erin trailing.

"No way. Kari will have to help me. Erin was supposed to help you, remember?"

Tammy nodded. That business plan seemed so far away. A restaurant where people could see their food grown and cooked. The idea had to have come from somewhere. It seemed silly. The only way she eat could away from home, was to create a gluten free restaurant idea for some one else to build. No one would take a teen seriously.

Nancy sat on the bed.

Yapper curled up nearby, with his head on his paws.

"Would you like tea?" Tammy sat down beside her.

Kari pulled Nancy's shoes off. "That would be good. Can you bring a snack too?"

Tammy jumped up and ran to the door. She turned back. "Thanks for helping me. Both of you!" She ran down the stairs.

Better to tell them now.

In the kitchen, a fresh pot of water boiled for tea on the wood stove. A tray sat on the counter with four cups and sweetened cornbread at the ready. Erin had prepared everything as usual.

At Genell's it would have been tea and cookies.

Tammy choked up.

No more tea at Genell's.

No more reason for her to go there. Except for Flora.

Of course, Flora. A reason to go this very afternoon.

The cornbread looked delicious. A missing crumb wouldn't be noticed. Tammy tasted a crumb, as she poured boiling water over the tea leaves.

Not as sweet as cookies. No aftertaste. A good thing.

Climbing the stairs with the tray balanced on her hands was more difficult than she expected. If mom knew she was taking food and drinks upstairs, would she be upset? She had never allowed it before. Except for the person who was sick. Nancy was different though. Erin hadn't said no, so it must be okay.

One thought made her stop. Nancy. Did Nancy know there wouldn't be cookies? She had been awfully silent about the diagnosis the night Genell.

Her mind drifted off. A tear formed. She'd get cookies for Nancy, if she had to. Nancy could have some and keep them hidden from Joe and Mark. And even herself. Tammy choked back the tears and continued up the stairs.

"Nancy, I'm so glad you're here. Let me know if I can get anything for you." Tammy placed the tray on the table beside Nancy.

Erin, Nancy, and Kari stared at her.

Nancy laughed. "Even if I had somewhere else to go, I wouldn't be able to would I? How would I keep up with my schoolwork?"

Tammy hugged her gently, "I don't want Kari to take you away. If you and Kari, and Erin go, I'll have to hang out with Alden!"

"And we all know how creepy he is, right?" Kari's eyes sparkled with laughter as she raised her teacup.

Tammy's nod slowed. She wasn't so sure anymore.

Everyone around her had changed, including Alden.

A pair of kittens tumbled into the room and across Yapper's paws. He nosed them off and looked up at Nancy.

She petted his head.

They chatted until Joe and Mark ran up the stairs demanding food.

Nancy didn't touch the sweet cornbread.

Erin shooed the boys to clean up. "To the kitchen. You need to make your own snacks."

"Can't we have Nancy's? She didn't eat it all," Mark said.

"No." Erin waved them out of the room and followed them.

"I'll talk to mom if you want real cookies and things," Tammy said. "No reason you should have to follow the rules.

Nancy patted her hand. "I'll follow the rules. Don't want to confuse Joe and Mark."

"Mom said it was for the best. Nancy and I can go for a short drive if she wants a different snack. You can't have them anymore either." Kari sat her cup on the tray.

"Are we going back to college?" Tammy leaned back against the wall.

"We have to leave tonight. You and I aren't excused from classes."

"Genell and Nancy are family. We should be excused."

Kari sighed and glanced at Nancy. "Yes, in our eyes we are. However, schools and workplaces don't see best friends, or roommates as family. I may get an incomplete because of one paper I didn't finish. If so, I'll have to repeat a class."

"Can't they give you a few extra days?"

"If they do it for me, they have to do it for everyone. Come on sis, I'll help you pack." Kari stood up and held out her hand.

Tammy shook her head. "I lost my job. I don't have my business plan for class."

Nancy grabbed her other hand. "I need you to take notes for me. Kari has a class at the same time. And perhaps Professor might give you more time, if you and Erin can write a few sentences into a business plan."

"Go ask her," Kari handed her the tray of cups.

Tammy wanted to help Nancy. Anything that would keep Erin and Kari close by. If they didn't leave, life could continue as it always had.

At least in some aspects.

She took the tray and hurried out of the room.

Chapter 22

Erin sat with Nancy.

Tammy and Kari had left in the bright yellow car for college.

A smiled flickered across Nancy's face. "You don't have to sit with me all the time."

Erin picked up a magazine. "I know. I'm waiting a few minutes until the boys settle. Then I am going to visit my grandmother."

"Kari said something about your plans. Don't let me interrupt them."

The magazine slid to the floor. "I have to convince Grandma to let my dad, his wife, and their two kids stay with her. She never forgave him."

Nancy shifted on the bed, "And you've never met them?"

"I don't remember my dad. He traveled, and was overseas when mom died. He never came back."

"So work on building that relationship. Did your grandma ever like your dad?" Nancy patted her shoulder.

Birds sung outside the window.

That was a good question. Grandma Jensen had never said anything really negative. Nor anything positive, about either of her parents. All the old stories were family stories of those long dead, or moved on to other regions of the country. "No idea. I can find out. She never told me much about him. His letters are rather formal. No personal stories."

"I'll be fine. Send Joe and Mark in if you like. They can read their studies to me. You'll be busy taking care of me, and your dad, for the next two weeks. It's the least I can do." Nancy stretched out on the bed.

"The pain meds will make you sleepy."

"Not too bad. I'm supposed to sit up a few hours a day, and have to do something. My ears still work." Nancy sat up and groaned.

"Okay, if you're sure." Erin laughed.

Nancy nodded and used her better arm to scoot back against the wall.

"Thanks." Erin walked across to her room. Tammy had left a mess as usual. Clothes and books scattered about. Cleaning up

would take too long now. It'd be there when she returned. She grabbed her dad's last letter before closing the door behind her.

The TV played downstairs. The open door increased the noise of shouting and gunfire with each step downwards. Ugh.

"Mark, Joe, take your readings up to Nancy. She'll listen to you today. I'll be back in an hour."

"Aw, do we haf to?" Joe said.

"It's a good movie. We can learn action dynamics." Mark grabbed the remote from the table, and slipped it under his shirt.

Erin turned off the set. "You can learn about them later. If your mom agrees with you watching violent movies. She didn't this morning. Right now, Nancy is waiting."

Joe and Mark looked at each other, grinned, and raced upstairs.

She checked the movie title. A space alien action adventure movie. They must have borrowed it from Corey. Alden would know the actors and movie name. The "R" rating meant Aunt Sherry wouldn't approve of it for the boys. She'd have to ask later it had been in Nancy's belongings.

Aunt Sherry had gone shopping for a few things for Nancy's visit. It wasn't so much her aunt didn't approve of the relationship between Kari and Nancy, as that she had had to give up her dreams for Kari. And, she didn't want the boys, or Tammy, thinking it was the only relationship style. With their dad gone so much for work and farm chores, the household ran almost like a single parent family, with a father who visited occasionally.

The clock chimed. Aunt Sherry would be home any time.

Grandma would be napping soon. There wasn't much time.

She closed and locked the door behind her.

The long path to Grandma's house stretched before her. Someday, it would be her own path. This path had once been a dirt road. No cars had driven down it since Grandfather died five years ago.

Branches brushed against her. The path would have to be cleared. Without the tools or the time, she'd have to ask for help.

Maybe Alden would help her.

The Jensen's place meant nothing to him. So he might not. Since Genell had died, he'd have double the work running Mare Valley. Not that she had helped much. Always running off with Bain, or to horse shows.

Erin pushed against the sticky, creaky gate.

It flew off as if newly hung, and oiled.

Someone had been here.

Her heart beat fast. She raced on down the path. One piece of trailing vines that had almost covered the path was off to the side.

The steps creaked when she reached them. Shadows covered the porch. No spider webs circled over the door. It looked cleaner than before.

Erin knocked on the door.

The door opened. Corey hovered behind it.

"What are you doing here?" She stepped back. He had never visited on his own before.

"Mrs. Jensen wanted me to come help her. She felt it would give me something to do to get my mind off of Genell."

"That's good. What all have you done?"

"Oiled the front door and the gate. I'm slowly cleaning off spider webs too."

"I'm sure she appreciates it. Is Grandma Jensen in the kitchen?"

"Yeah. Come on in." He opened the door further.

Erin stepped into the house. Sure enough, the hallway was cleaner. The light fixture still swung, without cobwebs dancing in the corners. The tiny table and picture book was cleared of dust. She pushed the door to the kitchen open.

Grandma Jensen rocked by the fire, knitting from the yarn skein Erin had picked out for her on the last visit.

"Grandma, I need to talk to you."

"Come child," Grandma patted her lap.

Erin walked over and sat beside her. "Nancy is some better. She's going to have to stay with us for a while."

Grandma Jensen rocked and waited. The lines on her face creased and wrinkled. Knitting needles clicked and clacked to the beat of her rocking chair.

"Please. May Dad and his family stay here with you. There is no other place that has enough room. Even if Mrs. Farlan did have enough room, I don't think even I'd want them there right now."

Grandma Jensen's rocking chair creaked to a gentle swaying motion. Her knitting needles slowed as well. She dropped her project on her lap. "I'd rather not. However, I mustn't be selfish. You

have a right to know your father. Even if you can never know your mother."

A relief.

The fire beside her crackled, and she turned to it. "I still miss your mother. And I wonder how your father will react when he sees you. She was only a few years older than you when they met. It will bring back memories. You're so much like her in so many ways."

Erin laughed. "Aunt Sherry said that mom was more like Tammy."

Grandma Jensen turned to her and smiled. "I think you're more like Tammy than you realize. You simply repressed it because you're in charge of raising Tammy. Which you never should have been."

"It can't be. Aunt Sherry relies on me. And trusts me. She barely speaks to Tammy." Erin walked over to the fireplace and the ever boiling hot water. She filled the teacups, and placed one on the side table next to the skein of yarn.

Grandma Jensen nodded. "The boys do keep her busy. I borrowed Corey to help me. Perhaps you should send Joe and Mark along as well." She picked her knitting back up.

Erin slipped down to the floor. "Grandma, I've always offered to help."

"Yes dear. However, the chores that I need done, a woman should never do alone. They take strength and dexterity."

"Washing dishes doesn't give you strength and dexterity? All the hard farm work doesn't give me strength and dexterity?" She leaned back to see her grandmother's face.

Grandma Jensen lowered her knitting and turned to Erin. "So many of the old ways are unspoken, and now misunderstood. True you could do it. However, you must never let a man know how strong you really are. The time will come to show your strength. We have to keep them busy and happy somehow. It makes them feel needed."

The fire crackled behind her. She couldn't hear Corey outside the kitchen.

"So, you waited all this time for Corey, Joe, or Mark, to ask what you needed? I could have asked them for you."

"That's not the point. They should have seen what was needed. They should have offered to help." Grandma Jensen started rocking again.

She picked up her teacup. "Now go along and help Corey pick out rooms for your father, his wife, and their two children. Send Joe and Mark tomorrow to help. There's a lot to be done."

Erin stood up slowly. Even Grandma had secrets. What other secrets did this great house hold? It had been many years since she had explored the closed off wings.

She placed her teacup beside the sink.

Once in the hallway, she walked through the open door to the wing Grandma Jensen used for her bedroom.

Chapter 23

Tammy plodded down the stairs with her clothes bag in hand.

Kari waited at the bottom, pale, and out of sorts.

"Nancy'll be all right. Don't you think?"

Kari didn't answer. She stomped out the front door.

Tears welled in Tammy's eyes. She brushed them aside. If Kari didn't want her to go, she didn't have to. Erin would understand.

The door slammed shut behind her.

"Kari, I'll stay if it'll be too many bad memories."

"No you won't. Let's go. I'm grouchy." Kari slid into the driver's seat.

At the apartment, Kari handed Tammy the keys. "Go on in. I need a few minutes."

"You sure?" Tammy clutched the keys.

Kari nodded. Her head leaned forward to the steering wheel.

Tammy opened the apartment door. She shrugged her bag onto the floor beside the couch. Nothing appeared changed since she left with Kari and Nancy days ago. Kari had been in and out at least a few times, with Nancy in the hospital. Now, Nancy's smiling face wouldn't be here, cooking and cleaning. She wouldn't be here to help Tammy with her coursework, or tease her to get other things done.

Tammy's lip quivered.

Nothing stayed the same for even a few days now.

Crying wouldn't fix the past, Or the present. Kari mustn't see her tears. No matter how hard this would be for Tammy, it had to be a thousand times harder for her sister.

The door closed softly.

Tammy wiped her face and turned around.

Kari stood, her face clouded in fear. "We have to try."

Tammy ran to her sister and hugged her. "We'll make it. Nancy will be back soon."

"By the time she's back, you'll be gone, and Erin will be here."

"I can cook. What would you like?"

"I need to clean out the fridge and cabinets. For now let's talk." Kari sighed and walked to the kitchen table.

Tammy turned on some water to boil for tea. It wouldn't be like Mrs. Jensen's tea.

"My car isn't repairable. I'll have to get another one."

Tammy slid into a chair. "What about the one you are driving?"

"It's a rental. Insurance won't process the claim for months, and may not cover a new used car."

That's not good. Without a car, Kari would have to give up college and move back home. Erin might lose her chance too. "What can I do to help?"

Kari reached across for her hand. "I need you here, for company. A friend is going with us tomorrow to try to get me a car. He's a nice enough guy, so stay quiet."

"You don't like him?"

The water on the stove boiled.

Kari leaned back. "I don't know about that. He doesn't understand me."

Her sister's life choices were different, and men might not understand. Tammy stood up to get the tea cups.

"Oh, and by the way."

Tammy turned back to her sister.

"This car is as much about you, as me."

"Huh?" Her hands faltered.

"It's past time you learned to drive. Why didn't Erin teach you a year ago?"

"What, clumsy me?" Tammy reached for the pan of water to pour it into the cups and spilled a good bit back onto the stove. At least it wasn't gravy.

Actually, driving was something she never thought about. Genell could drive. She had learned two years ago, before meeting Bain. Or, maybe that had been how she met him. Driving and boys, two things she wanted to push further into the future. Perhaps into the never happening future.

Her hands shook as she carried the cups back to the table. "I'm not ready."

"You waited too long. If you fall off a horse, you have to get back up and ride immediately, or you never will again." Kari peered at her.

Tammy pushed a cup toward Kari. The liquid sloshed all over the table. "I ride horses. I've never drove."

"You've never drove a car, true. You have a drove a tractor."

Scenes flashed before Tammy's eyes. Ultimate on the tines of the hay tractor. She gulped.

Another tractor, another time, another place. Trisket's limp and bloody body under the tire. Her border collie, born the same day as her.

A sob escaped.

Trisket and her pups were sleeping under the hay, and Tammy didn't see them.

The puppy screams and yelps when she backed over them haunted her. Trisket and her pups, a bloody dead mess mingled with fallen hay.

She had been in a rush to feed the horses and join Genell for dinner. Instead, she buried her best border collie, and the future border collies of the farm. She had refused another dog ever since. Though her bothers had kept Yapper, and other farm dogs, no where near as good as Trisket and her babies, to help them. Yapper had been from one of her early litters.

Tammy shook her head, trying to erase the memory. Push the nightmare back, deep into the night where it belonged. Driving anything was out of the question. Her own life was enough to be responsible for.

Kari reached across and took her hand. "We both have to heal. You can't depend on me or Erin forever."

Tears blurred Tammy's eyes. "Trisket died because of me."

"Trisket died because she hid her pups in the hay. She knew better. No one would have seen her. How would you have felt if Erin, or I, had been the one to back over her?" Kari shook her hand.

Tammy sniffled. "It was me. I'm always clumsy."

"No clumsier than anyone else. Do you think Nancy is going to let this wreck stop her from driving?"

Tammy pulled her hands away and dried her eyes. Nancy had no one else. If she did let this stop her, she'd have no one to depend on. She'd have to live in the city forever, something she would really not like.

City life, though a fun for a break from the farm, was not the life for anyone raised around horses. Tammy sniffed back her tears.

If Kari said it was time, she'd try. She could pretend she was riding Lilly.

No. Lilly was dead too.

It would have to be Flora. Everything outside that windshield was seen from Flora's back.

Hot tea burned her mouth and throat. Almost as much as the tears she gulped down.

Chapter 24

No sign of Corey.

Erin walked down the dimly lit the hall. Pictures of people, mostly family members, lined the walls. She had long forgotten who was who.

An open door revealed the large parlor room her grandmother slept in. A canopy bed with a step stool was beside a dresser covered with pictures of Erin's mom. A room lightly alive with memory.

Erin stepped back into the hallway.

The door to the first closed off wing was open. This wing wrapped back around, behind the kitchen, and was two stories high.

Light peeked through an open door down the dark and stale hallway.

Corey must be down that way, somewhere.

Dusty floor boards showed promise. At least they were undamaged. They could be washed well, and would shine like new.

At each room, she glanced in. These rooms were later additions than her grandmother's bedroom, and smaller. Curtains hung open, drooping from the weight of the dust. Sticks and twigs from rat and mice nests nestled in corners of the rooms. The creature's footprints showed their preferred traffic flow.

"Corey, where are you?" Erin shivered.

"Upstairs." His voice echoed through the walls.

The staircase doubled back over part of the rooms, giving one side an attic like feel. She tested the step with her hand on the rail. "Is it safe?"

"Yeah," Corey said. He appeared at the top with cleaning rag in hand. "I checked the other rooms quickly, and came on up here, to be sure these rooms were safe too. Wouldn't want the ceiling to fall on your dad, or his new wife."

Erin shuddered. "How bad is it?" She stepped gingerly up in the center of each step.

"Bad." Corey walked down the hall. "At least it's summer. It won't be cold. There's a lot of work to do."

Erin fingered the yellowed flowery wallpaper lining the hall. It looked okay here.

"It's here," Corey said.

The wall beside him was brown and green. The lines and shading weren't wallpaper.

"You can't clean that much mold with a rag."

"Not going to try. This place would be damp, cold, and dreary in the winter. It's going to take a lot of work."

"We have to make it safe for a week, anyway."

"Not us," Corey said. "One of our drivers does restoration work in the evenings. He'll have all the correct equipment."

"Better ask Grandma Jensen first."

"I will. Come look at this!" Corey led her back to the first room by the stairs.

Erin gasped as she entered the room. This had been her mother's room. No dust or dirt was on the floor or dresser here. It looked as if her mother had left it only moments before. "How?"

"No idea. I think you grandma spends as much time as she can in here. Or, did. Your Aunt Sherry comes and cleans it."

"The stairs, though."

"They had a pathway free of dust. Come on let's go. We need to go talk to Alden now. Make a plan." Corey walked out to the stairs.

"I want to fix the place permanently. I don't know what I want to do with it. I'd rattle around in here like a loose bowling ball."

Corey laughed. "You really want to fix it up?"

Erin nodded as she grasped the dusty stair rail.

"This place reminds me of somewhere. I'll ask mom." Corey leaned against the wall.

Erin followed him down the stairs. Their mom might not be the person to ask. Her attitude hadn't improved with Genell's death. If anything, her sense of entitlement had increased. Mrs. Farlan would probably try to convince her to sell the land to her and clear it for more horses. Erin wouldn't do that. Clear a little, yeah, to make it passable. Remove all the trees? No way. Mrs. Farlan would probably want to tear the house down.

They stopped and waved at Grandma Jensen. "We'll be back later. Upstairs is moldy."

Grandma Jensen rocked and nodded. "Think the roof leaks now. Your grandfather said it would need replacing in a few years, before he died."

Erin and Corey waited.

"Go on." Grandma Jensen waved her knitting at them.

They ran down the path and turned toward the horse farm.

Erin didn't want to go.

Alden wouldn't want to see her now. She couldn't use Tammy, or Genell, as an excuse for visiting.

It had to be done.

They reached the back porch out of breath, and collapsed on the steps.

The kitchen door opened and Alden walked out. "What are you two doing out here?"

"We came to find you," Corey said. "We need more help than I can give."

Alden sat a stack of papers down on the steps beside Erin. "What are you going to need?"

Erin glanced at the pages. Horse registration papers. Flora's might be in there. "Money, and lots of it. The roof leaks. There is mold. Mice and rats are living in the house. I want to live there. I want it to be a home for humans, not wild animals."

Choco nuzzled Corey's hand. "We don't need money. Weavon can do it. He will, if I ask nicely."

Alden eyed his young brother. He turned to Erin. "Is there a lot that needs to be done?"

Erin closed her eyes. She nodded. "Please, if we can get the worst of the mold off before my father comes. We can make a decision on the rest later. Grandmother Jensen thinks she won't live much longer."

"And the house goes to you?"

She nodded.

"We need all hands here right now. Luckily, Weavon is the only one I can spare for a day, no more. Let me know if you need anything else."

"How much will it cost? I've no money, and I don't dare ask Grandma."

Alden picked up the stack of papers. "And I won't ask you, or your Aunt Sherry, for money. Corey, go find Weavon. He needs to

evaluate what equipment he needs for the job. He should be mowing the pasture beyond Ultimate's."

Corey hugged Choco and ran off, the dog at his heels.

Alden turned to her. "Erin, we will work something out. After Tammy comes home."

Emotions welled up deep inside, fighting to get out. Anger, shame, fear, and even joy, that he would be willing to help. "Please don't say anything to her."

His hand reached to hers. "Erin I tried. Honest I did. I'll never think of you as more than a sister. I wish I liked you more than Tammy. It would make everything easier for you now."

It didn't make it any easier to have him put it in words.

Alden lifted her chin. "I promise, I will say nothing to her until she is more than ready to hear, and of age to hear. Who knows, things may change. Though, I don't think so."

He sighed, stood up, and walked off with the pages dragging his arms down low.

Erin sagged against the porch rail. It made no sense. She was older than Alden, and he still preferred the one Grandma Jensen called the younger, less tame version of herself.

The kitchen door slammed and a few workers walked down the steps and glanced at her. Her red, tear streaked face wouldn't seem out of place at the moment. They'd think she was mourning Genell.

Aunt Sherry would be waiting. She'd better return before anyone else came outside.

Chapter 25

Tammy scrambled through her backpack.

Who had that male customer been? He had given her a business card. She had shoved it in her pocket. Had she taken it out before dropping the uniform at Zorina's feet?

"Eggs, ham, and green beans are all we have," Kari said.

"How can that be?" Tammy sat back on her heels.

Kari had piled the remains of the spaghetti feast and chocolate cake on the counter.

"You don't have to throw everything out on my account."

Kari peered over the counter. "Wouldn't matter if I wanted to or not. Everything else is expired. Doesn't matter anyway. I better get used to living without gluten again for when Erin comes to stay."

"It's your home. She won't expect you to." Tammy closed the bag.

"Yes she will. I would be a rude host if I didn't."

"Do you want me to take the old food to the dumpster?" Tammy sat up and watched her sister.

"No. What are you doing anyway?" Kari leaned across the counter.

"Looking for a business card some man handed me when I was fired from the Clucker."

"If you find it, let me know." Kari picked up the garbage bag. "Irwan will be here at 7am, before classes. We need a good night's rest."

The door shut behind Kari.

Tammy searched again. If she had a purse, she'd look there. She'd never carried one. Perhaps the wallet Erin had dumped in her bag as she walked out the door. It was buried under the books and wrinkled papers. Nope. It had three one dollar bills folded neatly. Nothing else.

The couch would be her bed for the night. She leaned back on it. Nancy wouldn't be there to tuck her. Her sister had never tucked her in here.

Kari opened the door. "Any luck?"

Tammy shook her head. "Guess I will sleep. See you in the morning."

She leaned back on the pillow and closed her eyes. Nothing felt right. Scenes flashed before her eyes. Ultimate's bloody body. Trisket and her pups. Genell pulled from the car.

Kari puttered around the apartment before going in her room and closing the door.

Tammy whimpered as the pictures cascaded back and forth in front of her eyes. She sat up. No way was she going to sleep like this. She turned on the table lamp and the TV. She flipped the stations until she found a soothing program.

Kari's light flipped off.

The show droned on, endlessly.

A light flicked on.

Tammy woke up slouched over half sitting, half laying down.

"You okay?" Kari asked.

Tammy nodded.

The TV screen flickered.

"Time to get ready for Irwan." Kari walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge. "Eggs and ham for breakfast. Fried or scrambled?"

"Fried. Um. Better make that scrambled." Tammy opened her suitcase for a change of clothes.

Erin had said the color of clothes meant something. What, she couldn't remember.

It wasn't long before Irwan knocked at the door.

He was a nice enough person. He laughed and joked with Kari.

"What kind and color of car do you want?"

"Something that runs good, and for a long time," Kari said.

Irwan drove to a car lot labeled "buy here, pay here."

"No way," Kari said. "I want a car with a warranty. No lemons please."

"Ah, aren't they all?" He turned back onto the road.

At the next dealership, Kari turned to her. "Okay, help me pick, sis."

Tammy gulped. She walked through the line of cars as Kari and Irwan talked to a salesman.

A blue and a green car sat side by side. Identical in shape outside. She peered in the windows. The blue car had a different gear shift set up than any she had seen in a car before. It even had an extra pedal.

Kari and Irwan walked over. "Do you like it?"

"It has an extra pedal."

"Can't have that one then. I can't drive a stick shift," Kari said.

"You can learn and teach Tammy at the same time," Irwan said.

"No thanks. I'd rather feel more in control by focusing on the road, not the floorboard."

"What about the green, almost teal car?" Tammy asked as she walked over to it.

The price tag on the window was a thousand dollars more than the blue car. Didn't make any sense. More money for fewer pedals.

The salesman walked up dangling the keys. "Who drives first?"

Kari glanced at him and said, "My sister doesn't have her permit, she can't drive it, can she?"

"No. Is this going to be the car she is going to learn in?"

"Hopefully," Kari said.

The man turned to Tammy. "You heard your sister. Into the driver's seat."

She gulped. "You said I couldn't drive."

He laughed. "You can't buy a car you haven't checked to see if you can drive. I'll hold the keys."

No escape. She glared at Kari.

The man unlocked the door.

Tammy slipped down into the bucket seat.

The man told her what to check for, and how to adjust the seat. "Take the keys, and turn it on. Have to show you how to work the lights and windshield wipers." He handed the keys through the open window to her.

Tammy took the keys. They shook in her hands. Another set of keys flashed back in her memory.

Kari slipped in beside her and patted her knee. "You don't have to turn it all the way on this time."

Irwan stood at the front of the car.

"Get out the way, Irwan," Kari said.

"She's not driving."

"Irwan. Please." Kari glanced at Tammy. "Take your feet away from the pedals."

Tammy inserted the key and turned it. Nothing happened.

Irwan stepped out of the way. "Lights are on in the front."

The salesman showed her a few more quickly forgotten tips about the car. Then Kari test drove it.

Tammy stayed at the lot with Irwan.

"What did you think would happen? Your face was pale, as if you had seen a ghost," Irwan said.

Tammy sat on the hood of his car, and kicked her feet. She slowly told the stories she and Kari had discussed the night before.

"So that's why. Hey, don't let your sister become dependent on you either. You both need to be your own self." Irwan stared out at the road.

"There's too much going on right now," Tammy said.

"How old are you?"

"I'll be eighteen in two weeks."

"That is a lot of pain for an eighteen year old."

"There's more. I don't wanna talk about it though."

He patted her back. "I'll talk then. When I was six, my younger brother and I went swimming in a local pond."

"The duck and paddle boat pond?"

Irwan nodded. "He almost didn't come back."

The teal car pulled up beside them and Kari stepped out of the driver's seat. "A good start. Tammy you okay with it?"

Tammy nodded.

"Right this way for the paperwork," the salesman said.

Kari followed him.

"Guess I need to go?" Tammy said.

"You can stay," Kari hollered back.

Irwan stared at the building ahead of them.

"What happened?"

"I'll show you." Irwan snapped his fingers.

He rummaged in the glove box and brought out pictures.

The toddler in the picture lay on the grass, pale, and wet as a fish.

"They pulled him out. He jumped off the paddle boat beside my parents to join me, and no one knew until he was under."

Irwan looked up at Tammy. "I always felt guilty. It was my first swim alone. They were paying attention to me, not my brother."

"He's okay now?"

Irwan nodded and put the picture in his shirt pocket. "It took a few years. I'd let my brother do anything to prove I was glad he was

alive. A big mistake, if he had taken advantage of it. Well, beyond the occasional movie or dinner request."

Tammy tapped the hood of the car, separating some of the flaking paint. "Kari left for college not long after Trisket died."

"And now, she's trying to pull you closer, afraid you'll pull away again?"

Tammy nodded. "I can't replace Nancy."

Irwan laughed. "Course not. Nor does she want you to. She's going to give you a chance to rebuild the friendship she had with you before. You'll need that best friend all your life."

Irwan's not like my bratty brothers at all. "She told you about how she's like a mother to me?"

"Yeah. I'm like the big brother she never had, and always wanted. Here she comes, and she looks happy." He wiped the hood with his hand.

Sure enough, Kari walked up with the keys in hand. "We got it. Now, you have to find that card so we can get a job and pay for it."

"Where else can I look?" Tammy said.

"How about lunch out?" Irwan said. "Might be a good break."

Tammy swept her toe along the loose gravel.

"No," Kari said. "Thanks for bringing us. Tammy has a big presentation due on campus this afternoon. And she hasn't started it. Tonight I'll need your help to take the rental car back."

"Later then," Irwan said.

Tammy and Kari settled into the new car.

Kari glanced over at her. "Tomorrow, you test for your learner's permit. Today, you prepare for your presentation."

Tammy gulped. "I've hit the big time now?"

"Guess so."

Chapter 26

The porch swing creaked under Erin. Time to go home.

She passed through the no longer creaky gate and closed it easily.

So many things to think about. Her mind swirled, and she barely noticed the scenery as she passed the pathway to Mare Valley.

"Mrs. Erin, wait."

She turned.

Weavon ran from the pasture waving something. He ran up to her and handed her a card. "Found this in the car. It has Tammy's name on it."

Erin took the card. "Vincent Collins, investor and inventor. Who? Tammy never mentioned him. And her name on the back isn't in her handwriting."

"I dunno. You'll have to ask her. I'll help you any way I can with your gramma's house. Be there tonight to check it out." His thin frame wavered in the gentle breeze.

"I'll be there. Need to check on this." Erin turned the card over again.

Along the path back toward Aunt Sherry's house, she turned the card back and forth in her hands. She was half tempted to call the number and find out how this Mr. Vincent knew Tammy's name.

"Erin," Alden shouted from the Aunt Sherry's cow barn.

She glanced his way.

"Tell Tammy Flora is waiting on her. We need her help, now more than ever." He tossed more hay onto a cart.

"I'll tell her. She's presenting her business plan today."

"Good for her!" Alden said.

"Erin, I'm sorry for all your losses." He had leaned lightly on the pitch fork.

She glanced up. Her losses had been years in the making. "Alden, yours is the greater loss. A sister, a father, and a mother as a mother."

"I have your Aunt Sherry, as much as you do." Alden turned back to the barn.

Erin trudged on down the path. She had always thought of herself as the unselfish one. Always doing for the others, as Aunt

Sherry and Grandma Jensen expected. Uncle Daniel was rarely home, so Aunt Sherry took care of the finances and running the farm, while she cared for the children. Soon the children would be adults, and wouldn't need her.

Now though, they needed her to find a future for herself, and Tammy. Tammy's proposal could help. If only they had money. It wasn't much of future. Better than hiding in a farmhouse where everyone catered their eating habits to hers. She couldn't do that forever, or even much longer.

The house loomed ahead. It had been home so long. Maybe it was time she moved to Grandma Jensen's. Once Nancy was healed and back with Kari.

Mark and Joe ran out the door.

"We have to go wash our cow," Mark yelled as he raced by.

Those boys would be the envy of the fair. Their cow should win for all the attention they gave it. If only they were so attentive to their studies. Aunt Sherry didn't seem worried, so she shouldn't worry.

"Aunt Sherry, I'm home."

Aunt Sherry sat at the kitchen table and typed on her laptop. "Care to make us some tea?"

"I need to check on Nancy."

"She fell asleep an hour ago."

Erin turned on the water to boil. "Sorry. Hope the boys weren't too much trouble."

Aunt Sherry smiled. "They are my kids, not yours. If you ever want kids of your own, you'll sure know how to raise them."

Erin sat down beside her. "I had a long talk with Grandma Jensen."

Aunt Sherry closed the lid on her laptop. "So I gathered. Tell me?"

"She needs help. Alden is sending Weavon to help Corey. Mark and Joe can help later. It's a moldy mess upstairs, except my mother's room."

Aunt Sherry nodded. "Your grandfather did the best he could, then I took over. Should have left it for you I guess. For me, it was nice break away in peace and quiet."

"You never told me."

"You seemed so happy here, I didn't want to hurt you."

"I wish I had known."

"I should have told you. I'm sorry. Your grandma said she would tell you someday. I guess she never did."

"No. I know now, though."

The water boiled.

Erin made their tea, and thought while they talked. She had been so busy raising Tammy and teaching the boys, she had never planned or prepared for her own future. Somehow, it seemed so far away. Now, emptiness lay ahead.

Aunt Sherry touched her hand. "Tammy'll be home soon. I really think she will."

"I have to be at Grandma Jensen's in a few minutes to meet Weavon." Erin nodded and sipped her tea.

"Go on. We'll be fine. I'll cook tonight. I kinda miss it actually."

"Will you miss me when I'm gone?"

Aunt Sherry nodded. "I'll miss you. You'll be next door though. And I'll have an empty nest soon, unless the boys stay to run the farm. It'll be lonely, so come for tea, often."

Erin hugged Aunt Sherry.

The meeting with Weavon went as expected. It would be a complicated and costly repair process. A quick fix for her dad's visit would be accomplished in a few nights of hard work.

The next few days raced by. Daytime hours, she taught the boys, or spent time with Grandma Jensen. Evenings were spent wearing respirators, body suits, and gloves, to bleach and clean walls and floors.

After the third night the entire second floor had been scrubbed and cleaned.

"First floor isn't so bad," Weavon said. "I think I can do it by myself in two nights."

Erin grunted and tried to stand up from scrubbing the floor. "I can help."

Weavon picked up a few buckets to carry downstairs. "Corey'll be here to help you ready these rooms. We'll fix the roof later. We need money for that. I'll ask Alden what he wants to do." Weavon started down the stairs.

"How much do I owe you?" Erin dropped her cleaning rag in the bucket.

He turned back. "We are going to do a fund raiser. Until then, nothing."

"What kind of fund raiser?"

"Not sure. Alden is thinking. He said he'd send you an email tonight."

"That's good." Erin hurried down the stairs.

"Grandma Jensen, I'll be back tomorrow. Need anything?"

"No dear. I'll be here." Grandma Jensen rocked in her chair.

Weavon walked out the front door.

Erin quickly followed him and locked it behind them.

"Will you move into your mom's old room?"

Erin closed the gate. "I hadn't thought about it. That wouldn't feel right, and a forever shrine doesn't either."

"Come by sometime. My dad can tell stories of the house when your grandma was young. He still has newspaper clippings." Weavon walked ahead of her down the path.

"Grandma's told me many stories."

Weavon stopped at the turn in the trail. "Has she told you her dream for the home?"

"She hasn't told me about any dream."

"When she was your age. No I can't tell you. Ask her." Weavon trotted down the lane to Mare Valley.

Erin rushed back to her and Tammy's room.

Nancy's voice echoed across the hall.

Alden's email flashed on the screen.

"Researched the name on the business card. Legit business startup angel investor. Wonder what he was doing on campus? Anyway, need to chat with you and Tammy when she comes home next week. How did her presentation go?"

Erin smiled. At least they could still talk.

"Her presentation went well. I'll have to ask Nancy about her class. The professor told her it was good for a first time student. It needed a lot of work to be presented for real consideration. Funny. Hers was the only one given aloud."

Erin hit reply and waited. Of course, he might not see it tonight. And he hadn't told her what he wanted to talk to them both about.

Chapter 27

Tammy slipped in behind the wheel of the new used teal car. Her hands fell in her lap. The pedals were almost out of reach.

Kari slid into the passenger seat.

Tammy grabbed the wheel and turned to her. "You sure?"

Kari nodded. "It's your turn. You are driving home now. You can do this."

All the directions Kari had given her swum through her brain like pea soup.

The keys dangled from Kari's hands.

She reached for them and started the car. No problem so far. The traffic was lower this early in the morning. They would have left during the night when there would be even less traffic, except she couldn't legally drive in the dark until she had her full license.

Cars travelled a little too close. Otherwise, the drive wasn't too bad. Though the trip seemed longer than normal, according to the clock, the usual amount of time had passed. Tammy pulled into the driveway.

She handed the keys to Kari. "You'll want to see Nancy I know."

Kari didn't open the door. She reached over and put her hand on Tammy's. "You did a great job driving. I knew you would. This weekend will be fun."

Kari was acting odd, and Tammy wasn't sure why. She wanted to go inside and find Erin.

"Erin is at Mrs. Jensen's with her dad and his new wife. She won't be home much this weekend. Hope that's okay."

Tammy nodded. "Mom'll be waiting."

If Erin wasn't there, it was one more change in her life. Not something she looked forward to. Soon, Erin would be in college, and then what would she do.

The professor had said her business plan was okay, though it was all spoken aloud, and not drafted as the other students had done. She had not thought about writing more than a few notes. That had been an odd day. Erin hardly ever had them write out assignments. They had always repeated them aloud, to show they could speak their convictions clearly, or so she said.

Tammy walked into the house.

Normally the kitchen table would be covered to overflowing with papers, and mom's laptop. The boys would rush in and out. For some reason, at this time of day, it was quiet.

Kari hadn't walked in behind her.

Tammy carried her bag into the room she had shared with Erin for as long as they had lived there. She glanced across at Erin's empty and neatly made bed. Nothing was visibly missing, so she must be spending some time here.

The door across the hall banged shut. Voices murmured in the other room.

Tammy quickly dumped her backpack out onto the bed. She tossed her shoes underneath, and left her clothes scattered across the covers.

In the hallway, she closed the door softy.

"Tammy come here," Nancy's voice called.

Tammy opened the door.

Nancy and Kari sat on the bed holding hands, and looking out the window.

"Come on over." Kari patted the bed.

"Where is everyone?" Tammy sat down beside her.

"Your mom and the boys will be home soon. Then you can go to see Erin and her dad at Mrs. Jensen's." Nancy leaned over and picked up a folded note.

"Promise me you won't read this until after you meet with them?" Nancy held the page in her hand.

Why would that matter? He was Erin's dad, and Tammy had meant to avoid him. After all, he could take her to Europe with him and his new wife. "Sure. I won't read it now." Tammy reached for the page.

She took the folded note and put it in her pocket.

No need to wait on the boys to get home. So she decided to go ahead and leave Nancy and Kari visiting.

She walked down the lane between her house and Mrs. Jensen's not paying attention to where she was going. Cows and horses patiently grazed in the fields. Something about the cows and horses relaxed her.

Tammy reached the path to Genell's house. The roof of the breeding barn peaked out over the trees and brush. Alden and Cory

would be there, with Choco the dog. She had totally forgotten that she was supposed to be helping care for Lilly's foal, Flora.

Surely, Alden wouldn't expect to show up today. Erin and Mrs. Jensen were expecting her later. She had plenty of time. It wouldn't take long to sneak over and visit Flora. A twig snapped on the pathway.

Genell's mom might not even welcome her anymore.

She crept out into the clearing, in front of the breeding barn. No one was in sight. Although normally a colt stayed with their mothers here a few months, Mrs. Farlan might have had Flora moved.

Flora might not be in the only stall and barn she knew either.

Sunlight filtered though the open door, much as it had on that morning that seemed so long ago, and yet, like only yesterday. Clouds gathered, obscuring the sun as she rested her hand on the door.

Tammy whimpered, unintentionally. Her world had changed forever that day. Maybe that was why she kept forgetting Flora. She didn't want to remember her.

The coarse wood grain of the door was well worn, chewed on by horses and dogs. Her finger brushed against a series of splinters. Another job she had planned to do this summer.

She gulped and walked into the dimly lit barn.

Horses nickered. A chicken hurried out, and cats lounged around.

There was the stall where she had left Flora and Alden. He didn't seem so creepy now. He had fought to save the young foal.

Floating straw obscured her vision. It had once been peaceful, and welcoming. Now, it worried her. Her hand brushed her pocket. Had the foal died? Is that what Nancy knew?

Sunlight peeked in the window. The shadowed mare moved aside.

Flora stepped into the sunbeam.

She had grown. No longer spindle legged, about to fall. No longer the surviving runt of twins.

Tammy opened the gate and stepped forward.

Flora snorted and stepped back.

The mare nuzzled Tammy's outstretched hand, and the foal's nose.

The foal danced around. She came closer.

Tammy closed her eyes. This filly was so much like Lilly, when she was born. Ultimate's mane and tail graced Lilly's young body.

Whiskers and warm breath made Tammy giggle.

She reached out and touched Flora's neck.

Flora pulled back and looked to the mare.

The mare stomped her foot.

Tammy took the mare's bridle, and led her outside to the paddock. Flora danced behind at a safe distance.

She turned the mare in and gently slapped her hind quarters. The mare trotted off with Flora right behind.

Closing the gate, she leaned against the fence and watched.

A hand appeared on the rail beside her.

She turned to see Alden.

"You okay," he asked.

Tammy hadn't realized her eyes had teared. She thought it was the clouds. She wiped her eyes. "I'll be fine. I wish I were here this summer."

Alden turned toward her, then away. "You sure?"

His voice sounded choked. He had to be thinking of Genell.

"Yeah. It's home to me. I've been neglecting Flora. Sorry. I'll do better."

His hand reached for hers. "I know you will. She's beautiful. Promise me you'll take of you, and not be hurt deep inside, and hold it there."

Tammy nodded.

"I have to go," Alden said. "Erin is looking for you. She's still at Mrs. Jensen's."

Alden walked back toward the house. Part way there he turned, "I'll be at the party, if that's okay?"

Why would he ask? It was her eighteenth birthday, sure. It was only a party for family, and the neighbors. "I'd expect you there," Tammy said. "If you can stand the sight of me."

He smiled. "I'll be there. Didn't know if you might have a college boyfriend coming you don't want me to know about."

"As if!"

His smile disappeared. "Let me know if you ever find one."

"You'll be the first to know. Especially if Erin, Nancy, and Kari are in college."

He smiled and looped off to the house.

Men could be so funny sometimes. Tammy glanced back at the horses, and then turned to the pathway.

Halfway through, Corey and Choco raced by her. "Hurry," Corey shouted.

Tammy shook her head. Had everyone gone crazy? Genell's death must have had a serious impact on those at home while she was gone. Or maybe, she had changed more than she realized.

She raced up the path and stopped in front of the gate to Mrs. Jensen's house. It was open. Two early teen girls and a woman sat on her front porch.

Tammy gulped and walked up. "Hi."

The girls giggled.

The woman nodded.

"How are you?" Tammy asked.

The woman made a sound Tammy didn't recognize as a word.

She stepped back. Of course, this was Erin's dad's wife. She had no idea what country she might be from, or what language she might speak.

One girl, the younger looking of the two, almost dropped the picture book Mrs. Jensen used to tell her families' stories.

Tammy scooped it up before it hit the porch. She tried not to glare at the girl, and ran into the house.

The girls jumped up and tried to follow. The woman stopped them.

Tammy placed the book gently on the table. Even if the stories were old, she didn't want to lose them. They'd be here for her when Erin went to college.

She opened the kitchen door.

Erin and a man, who must be her father, looked up at her.

Erin's face was red, and she tried to speak. "Ready for the party?"

Tammy nodded. She didn't want to worry Erin, and didn't think holding it in was smart either. "Those girls on the porch tried to drop Mrs. Jensen's history story book."

"Fix yourself some tea and join us. They meant no harm." Erin nodded.

Mrs. Jensen jerked awake in her chair. "Yes, please join us. My son-in-law has many stories to tell."

Something about those words scared Tammy. She wasn't sure what, or why. Her hands shook as she reached for the boiling water.

Sitting down she looked at the man. "You are Erin's father?"

He nodded.

"Not now," Erin whispered.

Tammy glanced at her. What more secrets could there be?

"What are the girl's names?"

The man watched her closely, how she stirred the tea in her cup. "They are Dara and Bisera. Their names mean gift and pearl. They only know a few English words. I didn't encourage them to learn. Now wish I had."

Tammy glanced at Mrs. Jensen.

She sat with her eyes half closed, or so most people would think. Tammy knew that glare. She must have said the wrong the thing.

"Mrs. Jensen, would you like more tea?"

Mrs. Jensen, grumbled and pulled herself up in her chair. "No dear. I'm floating away already. I finished my shawl this morning. I'd like to make something for you. What would you like?"

Tammy's cup faltered in her hand. A drop leapt out, and landed on the tabletop.

Erin's father reached to wipe it up.

Tammy tried to think of anything Mrs. Jensen could make she would like, or would need. Nothing now. Maybe in the future, perhaps. "How about something pretty to put pans on? I'm going to learn to cook, and those Erin uses are nice."

"You like to cook?" Erin's father said.

"Meat and vegetable dishes are my favorites."

"Claude, you better tell your story now, before the guests come."

"No," Erin said. "Please don't."

Tammy pushed her empty cup away. "I don't really want to hear travel stories right now. Erin, Alden, said you wanted to see me."

Erin nodded. "I asked him to find you. I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Dad had news he wanted to share with both of us. I. I'm sorry. Can we have a moment alone?"

Erin's dad nodded and left the kitchen, closing the door behind him.

Mrs. Jensen rocked in her chair. "Yellow, I think."

Tammy placed her cup in the sink and picked out the yarn for Mrs. Jensen.

When she sat back down, Erin pushed two pictures toward her.

Chapter 28

As badly as she had taken the news, Tammy was a thousand times more unpredictable. Who else already knew? Erin took a deep breath.

Tammy sat at the table.

Erin pushed the two pictures across the table to her. "Both of these are father's American daughters."

Tammy looked up at her. "Two? They look alike to me."

"Babies, especially with the same parents, often do." Erin's hands shook.

Tammy turned the pictures over.

Erin waited for the outburst she expected.

It never came.

Tammy stared at the words on the backs of the pictures.

A tear dropped below them.

"That explains so much. Kari and Nancy acted funny, even Alden and Corey. I haven't even seen pesky Mark and Joe. Why did no one tell us?"

"Girls, come sit beside me like when you were young," Mrs. Jensen said.

Erin reached out her hand to Tammy. "Come on."

Tammy clutched her hand and they walked together to Mrs. Jensen.

Erin sat on one side of the rocker with Tammy on the other.

"Your story isn't all that unusual." Mrs. Jensen rocked between them. "Tammy, what do you think?"

Tammy looked up at her. "Who all knows?"

"Few. Each person acting odd has their own issues today. It has nothing to do with this news."

"Does Kari know?"

Mrs. Jensen shook her head.

She lifted her hands and waved them mysteriously. "Renea, my daughter died when Erin was only four years old. She had suspected she would be like me, and marry late. She wanted more than one child. To her, being an only child was sad."

Erin watched the fire crackle. "Mom wanted more kids?"

Mrs. Jensen nodded. "She wanted many. When she was twenty-five, she had her eggs harvested in a new technique so she could have babies anytime. Three years later, she was still alone. Single mothers weren't exactly frowned on, nor were they eagerly accepted, in her profession. So she adopted Sherry as her heir and niece."

"That's why I always called her aunt. I wondered."

Mrs. Jensen patted her hand. "When she finally met Claude and married, she had almost given up on using her eggs. Erin, you were a natural child, conceived, while waiting to see if egg fertilization had occurred."

"And me?" Tammy asked.

"Yes, Tammy," Mrs. Jensen said. "A special granddaughter. Claude came to me and Sherry while she was pregnant with Kari. He wanted her to carry another baby, and complete the family."

"And you said yes?" Erin said.

"I didn't feel it was my place to argue. After Tammy was born, and he saw her, he left. He promised me never to tell her that she was his daughter too."

"That's not right!" Tammy slammed her fists into the floor. Dust and ash drifted upwards, and wafted on the fireplace breeze.

"Tammy, have you ever seen mom's picture?" Erin asked.

"Don't think so." Tammy shook her head.

"Let's go see her room. The party starts soon."

Erin stood up and held out her hand. "It leaves me with many questions as well. Now that we know we are sisters, and not just roommates, it doesn't have to change anything."

Tammy nodded. She didn't take her hand.

Erin closed her eyes and turned to the door.

Upstairs, her mother, no, it was now their mother's room waited. Inside, the unwrinkled bedspread covered the feather bed that hadn't been changed in nearly thirty years.

Tammy walked around the room and looked at all the pictures. She touched them gently, smoothed out around the edges, not at all the wild child Erin had known for eighteen years. Kari's magical trip to the city had worked more wonders than Erin's gentle ways ever could have.

Could Kari have known? Subconsciously, at least? Her study of genetics proved an interest in subjects Erin valued, even if they

weren't ones she wanted to pursue. Perhaps she should follow in their mother's footsteps, and save her eggs as well. Sure didn't look like she would marry anytime soon. At twenty-five, it was the time to be planning for it. Once she went away to college with Kari, no one need ever know.

"I'm sorry Aunt Sherry never told us."

Tammy held one of their mother's pictures. "I really do look like her, don't I? You do too, though. And mom was always close to you and never to me."

She looked up, "Only she's not my mom, is she? She never really was."

Erin closed her eyes. For her, it was one family dynamic changing. For Tammy, it was every family dynamic. "You'll have to talk to her about it. I suspect she didn't like lying to you, and knew it would come out one day."

"I bet she knows all kinds of stories about, well our real mom, that Mrs. Jensen doesn't know." Tammy sat the picture down and flopped on the bed.

She flopped so hard, and the feathers were so old, the sides flapped up and closed around her like a sandwich. Feathers floated in the room.

"So was mom calm like me, or wild like you?" Erin asked as she worked to pull Tammy out of the now flattened bed.

The door opened. Aunt Sherry walked in.

"I heard the flop downstairs, and had to make sure you both were okay."

"We are, Aunt Sherry," Erin said.

Tammy's cheeks flushed as she looked at the woman she had called mother for eighteen years. All the years she could speak anyway.

Aunt Sherry sat on the dresser chair. "Mrs. Jensen said the secret was finally out. I don't know why your father wanted to wait until Tammy's eighteenth birthday. I begged him to reconsider. Many times over the years."

"That's why he never came to see me," Erin said.

"Yes. And you're wasting his precious short visit now. I suggest you go get to know your father and half-sisters while you can. We will deal with this as a family, as we've always done, once they have gone home."

"Mom, will I keep calling you mom?"

Aunt Sherry held out her arms to Tammy, no longer a child.

"Yes dear, if you wish. My name is on your birth certificate. You were adopted by me and my husband, the only father you have known once your real father gave you up, and ran away to Bulgaria."

Tammy ran to her.

Aunt Sherry hugged her close. "You'll always be a daughter to me, no matter what you decide. He should have told you long ago. Your life is limbo, more than any normal eighteen year old. Can you handle it?"

Tammy nodded and wiped away tears.

Erin glanced back at the room as she closed the door. Somehow, the floating feathers didn't seem out place.

Chapter 29

Downstairs, Alden and Corey carried an extra table into the dining room.

"Food's all here," Alden said. "Only what was asked for."

"Thanks." The only mother she had known said.

Tammy would keep calling her mom, and that was a relief. She glanced out the door at the girls on the porch. They were the half-sisters she had never known she had. Erin, who had been like a half-sister was really her full sister. She glanced up at Erin. "Come on Erin, let's have some fun."

Erin rolled her eyes.

"Be good." The warning tone in her mother's voice barely hid a gentle giggle.

Tammy ran out to where the girls stood. "Bisera, Dara, let's be friends."

She smiled as big as she could. Then she grabbed their hands, and ran down the path with them trailing behind, panting. At the retired horse fences she stopped.

"Stay," she pointed.

Across the path, an old wooden box sat, a few apples left. She took three out and handed one to each girl. She held hers out to the horses.

The girls followed her example.

They giggled as horsey whiskers plucked the apples from their hands.

Did the girls ever speak? If they didn't know English, they might be trying to be respectful, and not act like they were talking about her behind her back. They'd have plenty of time for that back home.

Erin caught up with them. "Come on. The party's all ready."

Tammy pulled away, and tapped the girl's shoulders.

They followed her back to Mrs. Jensen's house. Or now Grandma Jensen. It was too much to take in. Mom was right. Later would be better, once things settled back into a routine.

They walked into the hallway.

"How can you have an eighteenth birthday party without cake and ice cream?" The voice shouted. "My girls expected a cake. We told them there would be one."

Tammy glanced at Erin.

Erin's face was red.

Tammy took Erin's hand. "It's not only you. It's me too. And, it's my party."

Together they walked into the room to face the man who was their dad.

He turned as the four young women walked into the room.

"Erin how could you let this happen? I thought you were like your mom, and planned better."

Erin started to speak.

Tammy stepped forward. "Perhaps if you had ever come to see her, you might understand. I don't remember cake. The last wheat, bread, cake, or other goody has been out of our home since I was five. I made a mistake and ate them at a friend's. I never will again."

Alden came over to her and Erin.

The flush and the anger welled deep inside her. "Maybe you think living a lie for so many years was okay. I don't. Don't you dare speak to my sister that way. You gave her up, as much as you gave me up!" Tammy stamped her foot.

"Tammy calm down." Alden grabbed her arm.

Tammy pulled away. "It's been an ugly summer. My former best friend tried to kill who I thought was my sister's best friend. Then I find out I can never have wheat again either. Apparently it is in your dastardly cake, and I don't care. I don't want it. I don't want that pain and exhaustion ever again!"

Tammy stopped, panting.

The man stared at her.

Corey, Mark, Joe, Nancy, Kari and Mrs. Jensen clapped. Her mom and Erin joined in.

Tammy sat down. "This isn't what I wanted for my eighteenth birthday. How dare you ruin it."

The man stared at her.

Bisera, Dara, and his wife huddled against the wall. Afraid of her, after her outburst. So much for making friends.

"I think we have a party anyway," Alden said. "I wish I had known about your allergies long ago."

"I didn't know until a few weeks ago," Tammy said.

"Come on. Stand up birthday girl. It's time to open your presents." Alden held his hand out to her.

"Nancy, where is the present I had for Tammy?"

"I gave it to her earlier, and told her not to look at it," Nancy said.

"I forgot all about it!" Tammy reached into her pocket and pulled out the folded paper. It was covered in legalese writing. She glanced up at Alden.

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Flora is yours. If you want her."

"Of course I do! I'll never abandon her again." Tammy wanted to hug him so bad. He sure wasn't creepy anymore.

Alden laughed. His eyes sparkled. "You never truly abandoned her. She needed space, and so did you. Plus, college didn't hurt you at all."

Chapter 30

Erin's eyes watered and smarted. Their dad had come for her sister's eighteenth birthday, though not her own.

Alden joked with Tammy.

"Erin," Grandma Jensen said.

She walked over to her grandmother.

"I'm still here."

"Why?" Her own voice sounded strange and hollow.

Bisera and Dara chatted in a corner with their mother. Their language was so different, and communication had been too challenging to overcome with all the other problems of the day.

Mark, Joe, and Corey played with building blocks by the fire.

Aunt Sherry washed dishes.

Alden and Tammy talked at the table. Tammy hid her head.

Their dad stood by the door.

"I don't know," Grandma Jensen said. "Go find out."

It was the prudent thing to do. Somehow, she always ended up with the prudent chores.

She sat the tea cup by Grandma Jensen and walked over to her dad.

"Dad, can we talk?"

He nodded and stepped out into the hallway.

She followed. There were so many unanswered questions. Guessing where to start would be the tough part. She barely knew her dad from letters, and now, felt she knew him even less.

"Why now?"

The sound of the party behind them droned on as her father stared at the walls. "I've been a busy business man, and lost track of time. Suddenly, Bisera would be sixteen in a year. Where did the time go?"

"I guess it's easy to forget us, so far away."

"I always said I'd come back in a year or two. I intended to be back for Tammy's fifth and your thirteenth birthday. By the time I could schedule it, Aunt Sherry was moving everyone out here, and I couldn't face my mother-in-law."

Mark and Joe raced out the kitchen door.

"Be back later." Mark banged the front door.

Erin closed her eyes and shook her head.

"You never told me about your food allergies."

Erin looked up at him. "Guess I thought you didn't want to know. You weren't here, so it didn't matter did it?"

Her dad turned to the wall. "Guess not. What can I do to help you both?"

Erin's heart welled. "Have you ever sent money, or anything? Think you can buy us!"

She stamped her foot. "How dare you. We have spent two weeks fixing up Grandma Jensen's house so you, your new wife, and new daughters can visit. You can't buy us."

Erin turned to walk back into the kitchen.

"I didn't know." Her dad grabbed her arm.

She jerked away, "Did you ask?" Her temper surprised her.

Aunt Sherry turned from the sink. "Erin you okay?"

"I think so. I don't think it's been a good day for anyone."

"Oh, I don't know. Feelings need to be spoken out loud sometimes. Clear the air. All that." Aunt Sherry tilted her head toward Tammy and Alden, heads close together at the table.

"Wonder what they are cooking up?" She handed a drying towel to Erin.

It wasn't long before the party ended.

Bisera, Dara, and their mother went upstairs. No surprise. They couldn't communicate in English, and couldn't join the conversation. Her dad followed them, as no one would speak to him either.

Corey left after trying to get Alden to leave.

Alden stood up. "Guess I better go for the night. Mrs. Jensen, if you need anything, please call me. We'll see what we can do about getting the roof replaced soon. Not sure if Weavon can do it though."

"The roof needs replacing?" Erin's dad walked in the room.

"Sure does. The mold was a mess." Alden placed his hands on Tammy's chair.

Erin's dad walked to the table. "I'll loan you the money to fix it, since Erin and Tammy will inherit the place, I think."

"No way. Wouldn't touch a dime of yours." Tammy slammed her fist on the table.

"No. We will make do as always. You didn't need us. And we don't need you," Erin said.

Alden glanced back and forth at the group. "Erin, I did manage to reach Vincent Collins, we can get a loan."

"How would we ever pay it back?" Erin asked. Gluten intolerance made working with other people out of the question, especially if she wanted to go to college.

"We'd work something out," her dad said.

"Claude, I think you've done enough," Grandma Jensen said. "You came for your visit. You leave in a few days to travel, correct?"

He nodded. "I guess so. I wish I could do something for my two oldest daughters."

Mrs. Jensen struggled to stand up.

Alden ran to help her.

"Claude, you've had twenty-five years to save up money and know Erin. You left when Erin was four, and disappeared for good when she was nine. You have had plenty of time to save money, or gifts, for them both. Did you? Where are they?"

Erin's dad wavered. "I never kept things. There was never room."

"You never even asked for my email address," Erin said. "Maybe, my step sisters and I could have been pen pals."

"I'm sorry. Even though I thought of you both often, I kept my past life in the past."

"And that is where we belong," Erin said.

She took Tammy's hand. "Come on. We are going home."

Tammy stood up. "I think home is best right now. Maybe I can find a job. That business card had a name and number on it."

Erin glanced at her dad. He stood alone on one side of the kitchen, by the door. Together in one line, stood Grandma Jensen, Aunt Sherry, herself, Tammy, and Alden. All the family she had ever known, and could remember.

"Alden found it. That's the Vincent Collins he emailed. We will talk about this at home. Grandma Jensen, will you be okay?"

Grandma Jensen nodded.

Alden helped her back to her seat.

"Can I send the girls to visit tomorrow?"

"Bisera and Dara are welcome to visit before you leave," Tammy said. "Anything less would be cruel to them. They may need us someday, as much as we may have needed them in our lives."

Tammy took one step toward him. "You are a liar. You lied to Erin for eighteen years. You requested others to lie about me, for you. What lies have you told your new wife, Bisera, and Dara?"

Tammy stomped out of the room.

Alden followed.

Aunt Sherry took Erin's hand. "Claude, give her some time to adjust. She is right. I won't lie to her, or anyone else, anymore."

"I loved Renea." He broke down and cried.

"And yet, you abandoned your children. Renea lives on in Erin, Tammy, and even in Mark and Joe." Aunt Sherry said.

"Mark and Joe are you and Daniel's," Erin's dad said.

Aunt Sherry smiled. "Yes. However, we know more about genetics now. Fetal cells from one baby, such as Tammy, enter the mother's body, become part of her, and all her future children. For all we know, Joe and Mark may have chimera Renea cells."

He glared at her. "I have no idea what you are talking about. I don't want to know."

He walked out of the room and up the stairs.

Erin and Aunt Sherry said their goodnights to Grandma Jensen, and started the walk home.

"What do you mean by chimera cells?"

Aunt Sherry sighed. "It's a scientific concept that Kari is studying. She believes she may be a true chimera, and not have more than a few random chimera cells in her body. I imagine Mark, or Joe, could explain it to you as well. All my kids know science so well. Must be Daniel's influence."

"I'll ask them then." Erin took Aunt Sherry's hand and swung it like little girl. They half danced down the path, glad to be free of secrets, for the moment.

Chapter 31

Tammy struggled with the brush in her curly hair. "What will this Vincent Collins ask?"

Primly dressed and sparkling Erin giggled. "You've met him, remember?"

Tammy groaned. "I'd like to forget it. What if he remembers me? He splashed grease all over my nasty uniform."

Tammy shivered. She had chosen a pair of navy pants, the ones she had worn to Genell's funeral. Today could very well be the funeral of their future. Perhaps they could still convince their dad to loan them the money. He hadn't left. Her white shirt was grey under her arms, so she'd have to keep them down.

"He's here," Nancy yelled from the next room.

"You'll be fine. Come on sis." Erin held out her hand.

"How can we be sisters, you so prim and proper, and me so wild?"

Erin laughed as she walked around Mark and Joe's shoes at the bottom of the stairs. "Everyone wonders the same. Mom must have had conflicting personalities."

"No one ever said either of us is like Dad?" Tammy held the kitchen door closed.

"No," Erin said. "Come on. This will be fine."

Erin pushed the door open.

Tammy followed her through.

At the kitchen table, Alden and her mom sat with Vincent Collins.

The man stood up. "Hello, I'm Mr. Collins." He held his hand out.

Erin walked forward and shook his hand. She took a seat and turned to Tammy.

If he remembered her, he'd likely say so now. In front of Alden. Tammy gulped. She tiptoed to the table and ignored his outstretched hand.

Her mom made a funny noise and nodded toward Mr. Collins.

Tammy tried to not look at him as she shook his hand.

"Young lady, we are gathered here because you have a plan?"

Erin didn't speak and share the business plan.

Her face turned red as everyone stared at her. "Erin what's your plan?"

"It's not my plan, it's yours." Erin laughed.

Tammy put her hands to her face. "I don't have plan."

Erin grabbed her hands away. "Yes you do. We have to save Grandma Jensen's home. Give this man the same business plan you gave the professor."

"She tried not to laugh at me."

"Let me fix us all some tea. Why don't you close your eyes and tell the story as you told the professor." Erin sounded exasperated.

Tammy tried not to groan. This man really would think she was an idiot now.

She closed her eyes. What had she told the professor? She stood up behind her chair and held on.

Her eyes opened as Alden's hand found hers.

"Tell the story as if you were telling me. Like last night."

Tammy stood much as she had in the professor's class and peered out over Alden's head.

"My nanny. No, now she's my sister. Anyway, she has been gluten intolerant for over a decade. I only recently found out I was also. She was sad, and angry when she discovered I was as well. We never had gluten at home, she always cooked excellent meals. Now, we don't know where we could ever work, or eat out in public. So our dream."

She paused to glance at Erin.

Her sister had tears in her eyes as she placed tea cups on the table.

Tammy gulped. Had she said something wrong?

Alden patted her hand.

"Our. Our dream is to open a restaurant for people like us. Both to employ us, and provide others like us with a place to eat." Tammy droned on with what she thought she had said in the professor's class.

Erin, sitting beside Mr. Collins, smiled.

When she finished she sat down and waited.

No one said anything.

"It isn't good, is it?"

Mr. Collins shifted in his chair. "You know, you have all the right ideas, and I know your heart is in the right place."

"Please don't say no," Erin said.

"You are young, Tammy. Banks, and society, would argue with me for helping you open a restaurant. They would say I am stealing your life away. You are young, and enjoy it." Mr. Collins sipped from his cup.

Tammy folded and unfolded a napkin. "Erin is going away to college. I was homeschooled, and she says my schooling is done. What else will I do?"

"You don't have a diploma?" Mr. Collins eyes lit up.

Tammy shook her head.

"One more strike against you."

"Three strikes, and I'm out? I turned eighteen yesterday. Don't take my future away because society, who don't know me, say I'm not ready!"

"Good to see some life in you." Mr. Collins grinned.

He turned to Erin, "How about you? Do you want this?"

She nodded. "It's my only hope to save Grandma Jensen's home."

Mr. Collins pushed his half empty tea cup away. "I can see there has been some confusion here. Someday, I hope to better understand Tammy's comments at the beginning of her speech. I guess we better go see this place you plan to open the restaurant in."

Tammy gasped. "We don't have a place."

Mr. Collins turned to her. "What? Did you neglect to check rental fees, utilities, zoning, and the other aspects you would need to know?"

Tammy's lip drooped. "Sir, I was asked unexpectedly in a class to give a presentation. I had no idea what I was doing. I haven't even picked up my report on what the professor thinks I need to work on."

"So, you called me, even though you weren't ready for a job?"

Tammy searched his face, trying to decide if he remembered her.

He laughed. "Yes, I remember the little spitfire. Should I come back in a week when you finish your assignment?"

Tammy nodded.

"Wait," Alden said. "Can we go ahead and look at Mrs. Jensen's home?"

"Sure." Mr. Vincent smiled.

"Tammy, you and Alden stay here. Maybe you can research and answer some of Mr. Vincent's questions when we come back," Erin said. "Aunt Sherry, please come to keep the peace."

Tammy's mom laughed.

She'd keep calling her mom, as she always had. Somehow, their distant relationship might become closer if she did.

"I'll go. We might send Bisera and Dara on down to visit."

"Okay," Tammy said. "Alden do you know what we need to look for?"

Mr. Collins opened a folder and handed him a piece of paper. "I'm confused about who is related to who right now. So Alden, help your sister, or whoever she is."

"She better not be my sister." Alden turned red and took the paper.

Erin took Mr. Collins elbow. "We are still a bit confused ourselves. I'll try to explain on the way to my grandmother's house.

Tammy's mom hid her laughing face. "Guess I better go. Be careful you two. Find the answers you need."

The kitchen door closed behind them.

She turned to Alden. "What do we look for?"

His face was still red. "Mr. Collins has a list here he has to fill in. I'll start with the classifieds on your mom's computer. Or, you are still calling her mom, right?"

Tammy nodded.

"You look up the number for utilities, phone, and city hall for zoning and licensing. Try to call them and get some kind of answer, even if it's vague. Even hookup fees would help now."

Tammy ran into the living room to find the phone books hidden under the coffee table, which had probably never had coffee on it.

Chapter 32

Erin strolled ahead of Mr. Collins. Her hands wavered as she glanced at each familiar object along the pathway. If they couldn't get the loan she might lose her future home. Somehow, as much as she had wanted independence from Tammy, now, more than ever, she wanted to verify she would have a place to come home to.

"Erin, slow up a bit," Aunt Sherry said.

She glanced back.

Mr. Collins struggled to keep up. His arms swung wide as he moved forward, and he gasped for breath.

"Sorry," he said. "I enjoy the scenery. Too much time in the city I guess."

Erin waited at the gate to the retired horse pasture.

"What do you with the horses?" Mr. Collins asked. He leaned up against the fence and looked out across the fields.

"They are retirees," Aunt Sherry said. "We board them until they die of old age."

Mr. Collins turned to her, "So they don't serve a purpose here?"

"As lawn mowers, I guess. Most are too old to be ridden, even here on the farm," Erin said. "That stallion over there, he gets to visit the house when they have events for the local school children. Kids squeal with delight to pet such a big horse."

Mr. Collins nodded. "Hmm. I see you have cows as well."

"Yes, the boys have a prize heifer. They are probably washing and prettying her up for the fair now. We keep some of them for our own meat, and sell others as meat for extra money. Eggs from the hens bring us a little income too. Uncle Daniel takes the surplus to a farmer's market in the summer."

"Several repeat customers help keep us going in lean times."

"Saw a garden as I turned in," Mr. Collins said.

"We grow most of our own food." Erin wondered what he could be thinking. Of course, entrepreneurs often asked and noticed little things no one else ever thought of. At least the successful one's she had read about.

He turned to her, "Care to explain who is who?"

Of course, he would have to know before he could help them.

Aunt Sherry stood beside her.

"It's complicated. One secret was only revealed last night at Tammy's eighteenth birthday party." Erin launched into the story, as best she could.

Twigs snapped behind her.

"Hey Erin," Corey said. "Where are Mark and Joe?"

"Likely at the cow barn."

Corey stared at Mr. Collins. He jumped the fence, and turned back to her. "Tell Tammy, I finally figured out what your Grandma's house reminds me of."

"Yeah?"

"Some family restaurant we went to years ago in the city, before dad died." Corey ran off at top speed.

No catching him to clarify what he said.

"Guess we better go see this restaurant look-a-like house," Mr. Collins said.

Erin led the way, glancing back to be sure Mr. Collins could keep up.

At the gate, she stopped.

The home looked so different now. They had put so much work into it, would it even look like it needed repairs.

"Corey oiled the gate, and we've done a lot for my dad's visit. If we don't fix the roof though, in the next few weeks, it'll fall within the next year, likely in next spring's rains." Erin pushed the gate open.

Mr. Collins went up the porch. "Mind if I walk around the house?"

"I don't think Grandma Jensen would mind."

He stepped back and eyed the roof. He walked around to the side where the shed was.

Aunt Sherry walked up to the porch. "We better wait here."

In a few moments Mr. Collins came around the other side of the house.

He glanced up at them, and walked out into the vegetation. Grandma Jensen's herbal rows and circles dotted the side lawn. He tiptoed through them.

Erin waited. What could he be looking for in the herb gardens? Surely he didn't think anything illegal was planted there.

Mr. Collins walked up to the porch and looked at the rose bushes planted across its front. "Well, let's look at the inside."

"I'll let Grandma Jensen know you are here. Not sure if Dad and his family are here or not." Erin went into the house.

Mr. Collins stayed outside to talk to Aunt Sherry.

Erin walked in the front door without knocking. It felt odd to do so. Grandma Jensen had given her a key during the renovations, and told her she couldn't be up and down every time someone needed in the house.

The kitchen door hung open.

As usual, Grandma Jensen sat by the fire in her rocking chair.

"Grandma Jensen, Mr. Collins wants to look at the house." Erin stood beside her.

"Of course dear."

"Corey said it looks like a restaurant, and that's what Tammy wants to create. I don't know if we can, or want to."

"Why ever not? There are more rooms here than you both could easily fill."

"It was once a full a happy home. You even said your parents wanted to expand again."

"That was when families had many children, not singles, or pairs. Now, homes are often empty, as the elderly siblings die. All of mine died years ago. I wait to join them."

Erin settled her grandmother's shawl around, "Please don't die Grandmother."

Grandma Jensen patted her hand. "You should have had your mother when you need her most. I've already lived way past my time. Aunt Sherry will have to help you. Please bring Mr. Collins in."

She dried her eyes and walked back outside.

Mr. Collins watched her walk out the door.

Her hand reached up to hide her eyes. "Come in, Grandma Jensen is ready to meet you."

Mr. Collins grasped the handrail on the steps and walked up. "Don't worry; a restaurant won't destroy your home. I'll see to that."

She led him in and introduced him to Grandma Jensen.

Erin stood back and watched them talk. Mr. Collins was a nice man, not at all like most of the locals. Maybe someday, she'd meet someone like him, who might be interested in her.

"Erin?" Her dad walked in the open door.

"Yes Dad?"

"We've decided to start our travels early. Can I send Bisera and Dara on up to say goodbye to Tammy? They really like her."

Erin picked up the dish cloth and wiped the table. "Guess you'll go back to Bulgaria then? We'll never see you again."

He walked over and took the cloth from her hands. "I'm sorry. We are going to travel to a few tourist places while here. We can come back by if you want."

She took the cloth back. "Why bother. We can't communicate with your daughters, or your wife. Though Tammy wants their email addresses. I'll have to teach her how to use a computer to write to them."

Her dad turned to walk out the door. He grabbed the doorframe and said, "I should have taught them some English. However, I knew I would never learn their language if I spoke English, or a mixture at home."

He turned to her with tears in his eyes. "I am sorry. I really am. After the economic decline, it was almost impossible to keep a job if I didn't speak the language, and prove I was patriotic to the country."

"You could have come home."

"And abandon my wife and other two daughters?" He raised an eyebrow. "I thought about it. Maybe I could support everyone working a job here, and bring them here eventually. Then, the economy plummeted here as well. I couldn't come back seven years ago, like I hoped."

His shoulders slumped as he walked out of the room.

Erin knew she should go to him, and let him know it would all be okay.

Only, it wouldn't. He had left them behind before. He was leaving them behind again, without so much as an invite to visit.

She turned to the kitchen sink. Empty and shining, it didn't need cleaning. Tears streaked down face.

Aunt Sherry wrapped her arms around Erin. "We will be fine."

Footsteps echoed down the stairs. Bisera and Dara ran by the open door without slowing down.

Chapter 33

There was no way this would work. Tammy drew a line through the figures on her page. Utilities, rent, phone, and licenses could run well over two thousand dollars a month. They would have to pay that out for an unknown number of months before they opened, as they bought thousands of dollars worth of equipment, and trained themselves, and their fellow employees.

That lady at the health department had laughed at her. They'd have to go through training. The next class wouldn't start for months, and cost several hundred dollars. At least three people had to be certified to run the restaurant.

She drew a line down the page. Somehow, she had to find a way.

"Trying to find a list of food suppliers. It could take ages to be ready, for a good business plan." Alden's scratch pad was covered in Internet addresses.

"Who does your mom use?" Mrs. Farlan had to get the food for Mare Valley somewhere. A few workers grew tomatoes in a back garden. Everything else was trucked in.

Alden pushed the laptop away. "She has a plan at a local bulk purchase store. A restaurant would serve many more people than that would work for, if it is profitable."

A knock on the door startled her. No one knocked on their kitchen door. Everyone barged right on in.

"Come in." Alden leaned back.

The door opened. Bisera and Dara peered around it.

"Come on in," Tammy waved.

The girls giggled as they ran to the table. They pointed at the pages and numbers Tammy was working with.

Bisera picked up a pencil and gestured.

Tammy glanced at Alden.

He shrugged his shoulders.

She nodded.

Bisera pulled the paper to her, made a new, neat column of numbers, and handed it back to Tammy.

Tammy glanced at the sheet. Bisera had shown the outcome to be a little less than her fears. Still, not low enough.

Bisera wrote on a notepad. She handed it and the pencil to Dara.

Dara wrote something and passed it back to Tammy.

Alden glanced over. "Their email addresses. An email program can be set up to translate. You can visit online, if not in person."

He pulled the pad to him and looked for a website. "See, we can try to communicate here. Bulgarian right?"

They nodded.

He typed in "Thank you girls. Please keep in touch." The program translated it.

Bisera smiled. She pulled the laptop to her. "Tammy have email?"

Tammy tried not to laugh. Foreign languages often used different verb and subject combinations. Maybe they were using shorthand. Or, the translator didn't work quite right. She shook her head.

Alden pulled the laptop back to him and typed. "Tammy doesn't have email now. I'll set her up one soon." The translation was unreadable to Tammy.

He turned to Tammy, "I can give them mine, if that's okay."

"That would be great." She scribbled that on the notepad. Would it be another expense? At least of time.

He wrote his email on the notepad, and handed the sheet to Bisera.

She tucked it inside her pocket.

The door opened and Erin came in followed by Mr. Collins.

Dara stood up. Head low, she held out a small book. "Tam."

"Sure?" The cover was unusual.

Dara nodded.

Tammy accepted the book.

Erin and Mr. Collins sat down at the table.

A small book of tales with strange script on the front. She opened it, and most of it appeared to be in English. "Sisters, I will miss you. Write often." She handed it to Erin.

Dara and Bisera shook their heads.

Alden typed Tammy's words into the translator.

Bisera nodded and hugged Tammy, and even Alden.

Dara did the same.

They ran to Erin, gave her hug, and went out the door. Bisera closed it carefully behind them.

"I guess we should have studied Bulgaria in history," Erin said.

"I'm surprised you never did," Alden said.

"Guess I didn't want to know what kept my dad so far away from home. I was running as much as he was." Erin took a napkin out of the holder.

She pushed the book back to Tammy. "We'll read later. Aunt Sherry went looking for Mark and Joe. They will be needed."

Alden moved the laptop out of the way. "Sir, we've worked hard. I don't know how long it would take to get everything together. Mrs. Jensen's house can't wait that long."

Tammy pushed the page of figures to Mr. Collins, unsure what to say.

He studied it. Pushing his chair back, he put his finger tips together and leaned back. "So, Mrs. Jensen will allow her home to be turned into a restaurant."

Relief flooded through Tammy.

Mr. Collins looked at each of them. "Seems we have two loans to do. First, is fix the roof."

Erin nodded.

"Erin do you have Power of Attorney for your grandmother?"

"I don't think so."

He closed his eyes. "Okay, we can get that. Tomorrow. We also need the home ownership papers, deeds, and any lean information the bank may have. Can you find that tonight Erin?"

Erin grabbed the notepad and wrote down what he said. "I can sure try."

"Regardless of other implications, I require a forty eight hour waiting period to process the loan once the power of attorney is obtained."

Tammy groaned.

Mr. Collins leaned forward. "Trust me. You need forty eight hours. It'll take longer than that to find a reputable roofer and have a scheduled initial visit. Once the roof is complete, we can talk about the other aspects of building a business, and a business loan."

Alden leaned forward. "Shouldn't we begin now?"

"Sign up for the classes you need, if they are months away. Are you helping them?"

Alden glanced a Tammy and at Erin. "I feel I should. Mare Valley should be back to a new normal by then. I want to help."

Mr. Collins made a funny noise. "Tell me more about Mare Valley."

Tammy didn't want to listen. Alden might say anything.

"Mare Valley is a horse breeding farm. Actually, I can find out who did our roofing. It's probably about time again. I pretty much run the daily operations now."

Alden continued on into more complex details than Tammy realized were possible for the horse farm. To her, it had always seemed a fun place to be. Horses coming and going. People laughing and joking. Instead, Alden talked about the costs of each employee, that Tammy considered a friend. The costs of maintaining, and buying new equipment were far greater than she realized.

"How long have you been running Mare Valley?" Mr. Collins asked.

Alden leaned back. "Well, I've always been part of the activity. Dad trained me as well as he could. When he died of a heart attack five years ago, I was close to ready to take over. Weavon helped a lot with the few things I didn't know."

Mr. Collins nodded. "Erin, I'll gladly take some tea please."

Tammy waited. Mr. Collins seemed to be waiting on something; she had no idea what. Perhaps they wanted to talk without her in the room. "I'll be right back."

Mr. Collins jotted down notes and barely glanced up.

Alden typed on the laptop.

She'd have to learn more about Internet research from him if she and Erin wanted to run a business together. Even if he was creepy. Some of the time.

Erin carried the tea water to the table.

No one noticed her, so she slipped out the door.

Chapter 34

Papers littered the kitchen table. Three laptops opened to various searches shared the research everyone was working on.

Erin peered at Tammy's notes. The spring and early summer had changed Tammy in so many ways. It couldn't be reaching age eighteen. She had slowed down, and thought before doing most things now. Something Erin had never thought would happen. Her sister was almost boring.

Tammy rushed into the kitchen and carefully placed the basket of eggs in the refrigerator. "Are we ordering more chicks in the spring, or allowing ours to hatch naturally? We wouldn't have any eggs to sell, if we do."

She held the refrigerator door open.

Some things never changed, totally. "Probably should order chicks. Maybe turkeys too. Start a few new flocks. We'll need plenty. A few hundred should be plenty."

Tammy closed the door and sat at the table.

Aunt Sherry walked in the door. "You could serve turkey eggs too, if you want. How's the research going?"

Erin stacked pages. "Pretty good considering. You know, we'll have to build a driveway through here, and a parking lot beside Grandma Jensen's. It'll split your farm in half. Uncle Daniel won't like that."

Aunt Sherry laughed. "Not in half. Let's see. The house on one side of the restaurant road, and the farm feeding the restaurant on the other. "

"You sure you're okay with the plan?" Erin asked. "It's a lot to ask of you."

"Yes," Aunt Sherry said. "It will be a family farm and restaurant."

"Mom, do you consider us family?"

Aunt Sherry reached over and hugged Tammy. "Of course. I've not been too good at showing it, have I?"

"I thought maybe you'd send us to Mrs. Jensen's and let Mark and Joe go to eating anything they want." Tammy pulled back to peer at Aunt Sherry.

Aunt Sherry moved Tammy's stray hair out of her eyes. "And mess with the health Erin has given them? No way! Don't you

worry. You are here to stay. As long you want." She pulled Tammy close and looked into Erin's eyes.

Erin guessed that Aunt Sherry knew the same thing she did about Alden. She was eighteen now, he could ask her out anytime. Even though he hadn't said anything, he was often there sitting beside her, teaching her how to understand websites for ordering equipment and supplies. It hadn't been long ago that Tammy had called him creepy. Only yesterday, she leaned against him as he showed her something on a website.

The pain in her chest wasn't quite as bad as a few months ago. Maybe, just maybe, she was accepting Alden and Tammy as a future couple.

Kari and Nancy walked into the kitchen.

"I'll be back to get you in a few days Erin. Do you have your class schedule?" Kari hugged her mom and Tammy.

"Sure do. The roofers will only take a day or two."

"As long as they don't find any other problems. I hope not." Kari carried their suitcases on out the door.

Nancy walked up to Aunt Sherry. "Thanks so much for allowing me to stay Mrs. Eldridge."

"It's been a pleasure to have you Nancy. You've helped with the boys so much. We'll miss you. Stay safe."

"I will." Nancy waited for Kari to return for her.

Aunt Sherry didn't really like Nancy. Not that she disliked her. Nancy would have been fine as a friend for her daughter. In some ways, Aunt Sherry must feel like Renea had the better chance of passing on her home than she who had raised both of their families. Erin herself might end up a spinster if she didn't find someone at college.

"The roofers will be here soon. No research time today Tammy."

"Will Alden be coming?" Tammy closed her new laptop.

Erin closed her eyes as she dried the last of the breakfast dishes. "Not sure. Want to bring his stuff along, in case?"

Her sister grabbed the piles of papers and carefully stacked them.

"Go ahead and open up the house. I'll stay here to show the roofers the way," Erin said. "Still have a few dishes to put away anyway."

Tammy carried the laptops with her and left. The screen door didn't bang, like it used to.

Erin sat her drying towel down. "Aunt Sherry." She paused and waited. Words weren't adequate for her feelings, as scrambled as they were.

"Yes?" Aunt Sherry looked up from her computer.

Erin lifted her head to hide the stuffiness in her nose. "Everything has changed so fast."

"The things that matter most, a home for you both hasn't changed." She held out her hand.

"Shouldn't your land go to one of your own children?"

"Kari doesn't want it. The boys will work the land, for a few years, until they buy their own larger farms. Their dad has money set aside for them." Aunt Sherry moved a few pages on the table.

She stood up and walked over to Erin. "We could have paid to have all the work done on your grandmother's house. We've done so much for her over the years. It's time you girls have chance to make a few mistakes while I'm still here to help you out."

A horn honked outside. "Is that the way to the Jensen place?" A voice yelled.

"Thanks Aunt Sherry for being the best mom ever!" Erin hugged her.

She dropped the towel on the sink and ran outside to direct the trucks to the Jensen place. At least their tire marks would give a good indication of where, and how to start the parking lot and turn around area for the restaurant.

Chapter 35

Tammy knocked on the door of Mrs. Jensen's. The pencil poised across her teeth fell to the porch, and rolled between cracks of the boards.

The door opened slowly. "Come in Tammy. I need to give you a key as well, so you can come and go as you please."

A laptop slipped down her front. She grabbed it tight against her chest. "You'll always be here."

"In spirit, yes," Mrs. Jensen led the way to the kitchen.

She settled slowly and carefully into her rocking chair. "Tell me your plans."

"Sure you wanna know?" Tammy sorted papers and opened the laptop.

Mrs. Jensen nodded and kept rocking.

Tammy tried to explain what she and Alden had been working on.

"Don't put the cart before the horse, Tammy." Mrs. Jensen's eyes shone brightly.

"What have we forgotten?"

Hands fluttered in Mrs. Jensen's lap. "Oh, all the legal mumbo jumbo. Better call them first, and see what they say you need to do."

The door opened. Alden and Erin walked in.

"We're here. The roofers will start any minute," Erin said.

"Alden, are we getting ahead of ourselves?"

He turned the laptop on. "Not too far. We actually need to be sure we want to do this, and cover all the aspects before we do anything else."

"Have you checked to see if you can even get the needed permits?" Mrs. Jensen asked.

Alden sorted the stack of papers. "Mr. Collins is working on that for us. He is setting up an initial meeting next week. They'll come check the place over, and let us know what needs to be done. For now, he recommends we verify we have enough space. He sent some measurements for us to check, and figure out how we want to organize the space we do have."

Erin placed another log on the fire. "Sounds like a good idea. You both can do measurements. I'll go outside and be available if the roofers need anything."

Tammy picked up a blank piece of paper. Erin usually tried to go off with Alden and leave her behind. Or, send him on his own. She followed Alden out the door. Now she was acting odd for a big sister.

"Where do we start?"

Alden pulled a tape measure out of his pocket. "Wish I had graph paper. Try to draw the hallways as best you can. We need basic measurements right now, and to note any built in furniture."

Tammy nodded. "Mrs. Jensen's room has a built in wardrobe, not sure about anything else."

"We need to measure it. Her room won't be used. She has to stay here, I think," Alden said.

"Of course. Drawing's done."

"Okay. Take the end of the tape measure, and we'll measure the hallway first."

Tammy struggled with climbing behind bits of furniture in the hallway and the rooms.

Erin, Corey, and Weavon had worked so long to dust and clean all these rooms so well, over a month ago. Now, they were as dirty as ever.

Behind a large real wood dresser, Tammy tried to stand up. Her head went through a spider web.

"Yuck!" The more she tried to drag it off, the more entangled in her hair it became.

Alden laughed. "Here let me help you. I think we need a damp cloth on hand before we measure the other rooms."

Tammy pushed her way out from behind the dresser, "And less furniture in the rooms."

Alden pushed the heavy piece back. "I think we have enough to start a plan. I doubt we'll use the six rooms upstairs. Maybe, one for a little storage. Too much trouble carrying food, or furniture, up and down."

Tammy wrote the wall length on the drawing. A start with six rooms for customers. That would be more than enough.

She walked back through the rooms. All the furniture here had to go somewhere. Most was still in good condition, though well

used. More than any one family could use, except, well, maybe the one she had grown up in. If mom would store the furniture, Mark and Joe could restore it, and everyone would have all the furniture they would ever need when they moved out on their own.

One desk in the room across from Mrs. Jensen's drew her attention. Smooth wood grain reminded her of something. It would be perfect in the front hallway. Cubby holes filled with dust and cobwebs for the moment, would shine with a little care. She rubbed the dust away.

A sound behind her caused her to look up into the mirror overhead.

A reflection of Alden smiling in the doorway. "Anything else today?"

Something crashed outside the window.

"Guess we check on Erin," Tammy ran her hand one last time along the dresser.

Outside, clouds gathered in the earlier sunny skies. A dump truck sat between the house and shed. Men danced on the hot roof, shoveling tiles down into the truck. A van was parked almost in Mrs. Jensen's herb garden. Mark and Joe would know exactly what damage they would do, and how long before the soil would be safe to eat from again.

Erin sat in the shade of a tree. "How did it go?"

Tammy walked up and sat beside her. "Okay, I guess. Lots of numbers, and spiders."

Erin picked at her hair. "I see."

"Alden tried to get it out." Tammy bent over so Erin could check the back of her head.

"I bet." Erin's voice was higher pitched than normal.

Tammy glanced up.

Erin stared at Alden.

He shook his head.

They were keeping secrets from her, and she'd have to figure what it was. No more secrets allowed!

One of the men from the roofing company walked up. "Mrs. we will likely have to take off all the old boards and add new. So far, I've only found one I might leave on."

Erin sighed. "Go ahead then. Better be safe than sorry."

"What about Mrs. Jensen's herb garden? Where will we put a driveway and parking lot?" Tammy said.

There wasn't much space. All the trees belonged. Without them, it would be bare.

"We'll need the herb garden," Erin said. "We'll have to have a drive for delivery trucks, and who knows what else."

"Guess we can measure the dump truck to get an idea of a delivery truck's size," Alden said.

Another batch of roof plywood crashed into the dump truck. Dust billowed and settled as another pile crashed in.

"The best parking lot would probably be where the herb garden is. Could we move it, you think?" Tammy asked.

"Mark and Joe would know," Erin said.

Chapter 36

Erin pushed the laptop to the side. Building a recipe was far easier than typing it down. And trying to figure out how to size up, or down, or even how many a simple recipe served, required more precision than she had expected.

Aunt Sherry had taken over teaching Mark and Joe so she could go to college.

Nancy and Kari helped her organize her schedule for classes. Beginner classes for the first semester. Then business classes, and continue them online, if that was an option. With opening a business, would there even be time for classes? Especially a restaurant.

Mr. Collins knocked on the door.

"Come in," Erin said.

"I came early to see how it's going." He sat down across from her.

"Alden and Tammy will be here soon. They are caring for Flora."

Mr. Collins shuffled his folder and shifted in his chair. "Who is Flora? Another sister?"

"No." She laughed. "A young filly who needs training, and lots of it. Genell isn't here to help anymore." Even if Genell had been alive, she wouldn't have been there. She would have been a hundred miles away at college. Summer school before regular college. Tammy was at the local college instead. Because of Genell. That thought startled her.

Erin covered her eyes as the numbers and words danced before her.

"Sure you want to do this? It doesn't have to be a restaurant."

"It would have to be something to make money to pay back the roofing debt. I can cook, and care for kids, that's about it. I don't have many options."

Mr. Collins leaned forward. "You could make it a daycare. Or a camp for kids and young adults. It might cost less at the outset."

Erin shook her head. "I really want a break from kids. Until I have my own. If I ever do."

His fingertips touched as he leaned back. "Why wouldn't you?"

She laughed. "What man would be interested in a woman who can't go on a date?"

"You might be surprised. Anyway, back to the project. What do you want? It's your future home."

"I wish I knew. I've never had time to think about it."

Mark skidded through the kitchen and knocked over a chair. "I'll be back later Joe. We can't go fishing until you clean your side of the room."

"I don't want to fish. I want to catch minnows." The sound Joe made wasn't nice.

"Minnows are fish, silly!" Mark ran out the door.

Mr. Collins shuffled some paper. "Perhaps we should talk about this later. How about a trip to town? I know a nice restaurant."

Erin pulled back. "Don't you understand? I can't eat in any restaurant."

"We aren't going to eat. We are going to observe and learn. You have a lot more to teach Tammy. And you can't do that until you see it. She's an age that can be difficult for outsiders to connect to. And what she's been through in the last few months, is too challenging for me, or any health department supervisor, to reach her."

"I don't have my own car to drive. And I can't inconvenience you more to bring me home." Aunt Sherry would be angry if she found out this man was offering Erin a ride at her own kitchen table.

"How about your sister cousin?"

"Tammy? She can't drive."

"No. The other one. The one almost your age."

Oh. Kari. "Kari is at college. I'm to go myself soon. Alden is taking Tammy back for beginner business class tonight."

Mr. Collins gathered his papers. "Join her please? You need to go to orientation soon. Actually, both of you do. Call me when you settle in there for a few days."

"Kari's not going to like this."

"How so?" He stood and pushed his chair in.

"Nancy went home. I'm sure they wanted to be alone some. It'll be crowded with four in that tiny apartment."

"You and Tammy will be so busy, you'll hardly be there. At least we can meet next week."

"Okay. I'll call you."

Mr. Collins walked to the door. It slammed open in his face as Mark ran into the house.

"Joe hurry up!"

"Coming."

Erin ran to him. "Are you okay?"

He covered his nose. "I'll be fine. Guess it'll be steak for dinner."

He walked out the door without looking back.

She covered her eyes. He won't be back. We lost out funding.

"Mark, go to your room and don't come out until Aunt Sherry comes home."

"What! I didn't do anything! What was that man standing in the door for anyway?"

"Just go!" She held her arm out and pointed to the stairs.

He stared at her.

She shook her hand.

Mark slowly tromped up the stairs.

It might be overreacting on her part. So what! The recklessness of the boys she had tried to raise may have cost them her entire future. And Tammy's.

She sat down and placed her face in her hands.

The door pushed open slowly.

Aunt Sherry walked in.

Mark ran into the kitchen. "Mom, Erin doesn't like me anymore."

She rubbed his hair. "Time for a trim. Do you like you anymore?"

He nodded. "Though, I don't like slow pokes who block closed doors and I can't see them."

"Well. Open the door slowly please. Take your brother to the garden. You have chores to do."

"Come on Joe! We have to go now!" Mark ran out the door. It banged four times before Joe arrived in the kitchen rubbing his eyes.

"I yelled at him."

Aunt Sherry reached for her laptop. "Won't hurt him once in a while. He needs consequences. Obviously, one yell didn't make a difference."

Erin laughed. "He hurt Mr. Collins."

"Uh huh. He'll be okay too."

"Aunt Sherry, I don't know what to do."

She looked over the top of the laptop. "What does your heart say?"

"I don't know."

"You need to find it. You used to dream. When Tammy was little."

"That was a long time ago."

"Remember your stream house?"

The stream house. She hadn't been there in years. Alden used to meet her and Kari there to play when they were all little. Those were the days. No worries. No fears. Not a care in the world.

"Tell Mark I'm sorry."

"You tell him at dinner, or tomorrow. Be careful. The stream is high right now."

Erin hurried out of the house to the hideaway she had shared with Kari so many years ago.

Genell and Tammy had never been invited, so she expected it to be swept away.

Instead, fresh boards, fresh paint and even a new window were where the old stream house had been. Rocks rimmed the bottom of the wood.

The door squeaked open.

She stepped inside.

One wooden box sat against each of the three walls.

Of course. This was Corey, Mark, and Joe's place now.

Chapter 37

Tammy drummed her fingers on the desk.

Professor was talking. Though to whom, she wasn't sure. The words rambled together too fast, and too long without a break, for her to digest them.

Other students appeared to be sleeping. One man in the back of the room snored.

The professor turned to her desk and gathered papers.

Nancy smiled at her. "Are you bored?"

"I'm used to learning through conversation. I can't figure out who she is talking to."

The professor laughed. She placed a paper on the desk in front of Tammy. "I'm talking to the whole class."

Tammy shook her head. "No. You talked about many things. They aren't all forming restaurant businesses are they?"

The woman beside her sat up straight.

"No. What works for one should be adaptable to all situations. You need to learn from their plans as well."

"I need to learn mine first, so I have a basis on which to build. Even though Mark and Joe are pesky brothers, Erin doesn't try to teach them the same way as she does me. She encourages their strengths, so the weaknesses will be built up. And even though I can't learn science, she sometimes surprises me by saying 'That is a scientific principle.' Whatever that means."

The professor turned her head to the side.

Students laughed.

"Be quiet. She's supposed to teach you, and you aren't supposed to say a word." Nancy closed her folder.

"How can I learn without speaking and restating the information to verify I heard it right?" Tammy turned to her.

"Professor will kick you out of class for disturbing her teaching style."

"Do you think I would have time to individually teach every student in this class, and my other three classes?"

Tammy glanced around the room. No one was asleep now. Could a professor carry on a conversation with twenty or thirty students? Not at one time. "I don't think I can learn anything

meaningful this way. I'm sorry. Thank you for thinking my plan was a good idea."

She stood up and walked out the door.

Nancy ran up behind her. "You left the notes she gave you."

Tammy grabbed them. "I'd rather learn from an individual. All the bouncing around confuses me."

"I don't think you'll make it in college then."

"Nope. Nor apparently in the work world. I already failed that miserably."

"You don't understand authority."

"I won't bow down to people I don't know. They have to respect me as well. I treat people as equals. Even Erin has to work to keep the respect she receives from mom. If she acted the way Olly did in her teaching style, mom wouldn't let her teach us kids."

"How so?"

"I can't read minds. Skipping training doesn't work. Mark and Joe can't show their prize cow if they don't brush and bathe her, and they won't know to unless someone tells them to do so."

"It's in the rules, isn't it?"

"Of course. Now, if the rules weren't written, and they showed up with a dirty, unruly cow, they'd still be sent home. And wouldn't know why. Kinda like when I lost my job for trying to make the chicken taste better. How could I know the bun machine wouldn't take chicken? No one ever said so."

Nancy shifted her weight. "Guess he never thought he'd have to tell you that. No one else would ever think to try it. You have to obey authority, not question it."

"I think I need to go home."

"Not at all." Mr. Collins stood beside them. "So you're good at defying authority, and thinking on your own."

"It won't help me."

He raised his eyebrow. "Are you sure? Aren't you starting your own business?"

"If I can't blindly obey, how can I run my own business?"

"If you could blindly obey you wouldn't be able to. Come on let's go find Erin. Are you calling her sister or nanny?"

"I'll see you later." Nancy walked off toward one of the other buildings.

"I guess she's my sister. I haven't really thought about it." Tammy walked over to sit on the rock wall. "Where do we need to wait for her?"

Mr. Collins sat down beside her. "She should be here soon. Tell me about Erin. How well do you know her?"

"I can't remember not knowing her."

He shuffled on the rocks. "What about Alden? Is he going to help with the restaurant?"

Creepy Alden. Though, not so creepy anymore. "I don't know. I haven't thought about it. He runs Mare Valley. Isn't that enough?"

"Does he talk with Erin a lot?"

"Sometimes. Not as much as he used to. It's never mattered before."

"Okay. We'll wait on Erin." Mr. Collins leaned backwards.

"Do I need to change?"

"Don't change. Don't ever change. You won't get ahead by changing."

"That's what they want me to do. I think. It's what Nancy said."

"Sure it is. It's threatening to have someone on the same level as you."

"Aren't we all equals along the road, even if we are in different places?"

"Did Erin tell you that?"

Tammy nodded.

"That's good to hear. You will need her strength, and she will need yours."

Professor walked toward them.

Mr. Collins looked at his watch. "Erin should be here any minute."

Professor turned down the sidewalk. "Tammy, please do come back to class. I think we have a lot to learn from each other."

Tammy glanced at the paper the professor had placed on her desk. It was the quiz results. She had only missed one question. The one about who to contact if she was unsure of tax payments. There were too many options. The IRS, city, state, accountant, or lawyer. "I'll think about it. Mr. Collins has a lot for us to do to save the Jensen's home."

"I understand. Better than you think." She gave a slight nod and hurried on her way to wherever professors go when they're not in class.

Chapter 38

The speedometer hovered right on the speed limit. Erin leaned back in the seat. They'd be late for their appointment with Mr. Collins.

Off to the left was the clinic she had taken Genell to shortly before she killed herself and Ultimate. Erin shivered.

"If Weavon had arrived two minutes later, we would have been gone." Alden braked as the light changed to red.

"It's okay. If Mr. Collins doesn't understand the issues with running Mare Valley, he won't help us anyway. And the mare did need to be checked."

"That's what I pay Pandy and Miranda for."

The light changed to green. Two cars ran the red light before Alden could go.

"They had a training for a new technique. Or was it new equipment?"

"I know. I needed them both at the training at the same time. The timing is bad is all." Alden pulled into a space at the college campus and turned off the car.

Erin opened the door. "Aren't you going back home? I appreciate you bringing me here. I'll get my bag from the back."

Alden opened his door and stepped out. "Leave it for now. I'm in this experience as much as you and Tammy."

She closed the door. "What did you say to Tammy the other day?"

He walked around and looked in her eyes. "Nothing that gave her any ideas. I had fun, and laughed with her."

"Are you going to try to take the restaurant if it succeeds?"

"No way. That's for you. I know Tammy as well as you do. She won't stay there. Cooking isn't in her blood. Horses are."

Alden took her hand. "And if, dear future sister, you don't have children, I'd like the house to pass on to Tammy's children. Only if you have none, or none who wish to stay."

Erin pulled away. "And what if she doesn't want you for a husband?"

"Then, I'll always be her friend. And her employer, if she'll work for me." Alden walked toward the first building. "Where are we going, anyway?"

Erin laughed. "No idea. I thought you knew the campus well."

"Never been on this campus. I went to a campus across town for a business training course."

"One we need to take?"

"Perhaps. Let's go find Tammy."

In the center of the buildings Tammy sat with Mr. Collins. She stared at a piece of paper.

Mr. Collins leaned back, appearing to stare through the trees to the clouds above.

"You sure you want to come along?" Erin stopped as she spoke to Alden.

His hand brushed hers. "Yes. You both need me."

She glanced over at him.

He blinked and stepped forward, his laptop bag swinging from the change of speed. "I can do for you what I couldn't do for my sister."

Erin covered her mouth. Mr. Collins had seemed nice. He shouldn't have been alone with Tammy. Aunt Sherry would be furious.

"Tammy!" Erin hurried across the lawn.

Her sister looked up.

Erin reached her right behind Alden.

"I don't how I'm wrong on my answer." She handed the paper to Erin.

Erin glanced from Tammy to Mr. Collins and then to Alden.

"Don't ask me. Sis always makes an excellent grade almost impossible."

Tammy's jaw dropped as she turned to Mr. Collins.

He smiled and covered his mouth. "Wasn't supposed to tell you the professor was my sister, huh? How do you think I knew where and when to find you?"

"She brought this."

"I think she thought I might be here to meet her for lunch. I surprise her sometimes."

"Like the day at the Clucker." Tammy turned pale.

He laughed. "She had other plans I didn't know about that day. Let me see the paper."

Tammy handed it to him.

"You can explain your thinking on the ride to the restaurant. Ready to go?" He looked at Erin.

"I'm ready. Sorry we are late."

"With four of us, will you ride up front with me?"

She gulped. Maybe he wasn't so bad. And if Tammy was talking it wouldn't matter if she was sitting beside Alden out of sight. "Okay."

"I promise not to bite. Let's go."

She followed behind Mr. Collins to his car.

Alden chatted about Flora to Tammy behind them.

It would be okay. If her heart would slow down.

Perhaps she did need to be here with Tammy. Someone needed to watch her. Nancy and Kari couldn't stay with her every minute.

Chapter 39

Mr. Collins pulled the car into an empty parking lot. Strange trees where the limbs didn't grow below first floor windows littered the grass and flower covered islands.

"You sure it's okay to go be here?" Tammy squirmed at the imposing building looming over the parking lot.

Mr. Collins turned to look at her. "I promise. We have special permission to tour and eat before the normal dinner hours. The restaurant won't be open for customers for hours."

Tammy opened the car door and stepped out. A red carpet rolled out from the restaurant door. She glanced at Erin.

"Close your mouth. We aren't customers here. We aren't hopeful employees. Or even hopeful partners. We are here to learn." Erin stumbled around the car and toward the door.

Tammy followed and stayed beside Alden.

"Relax," Mr. Collins said. "I eat here frequently enough to know the owners well."

"I think my parents celebrated their last anniversary here. It'll be okay." Alden brushed against Tammy's hand. "You learned what you could from Olly. Now time to learn from a real restaurant manger."

"Um. I think this is beyond real. A red carpet?"

"It's waterproof. Are you scared?" Mr. Collins looked at her. "Imagine you are at Grandma Jensen's. I think you'll be surprised at how easy it is. If you can't be strong here, how will you ever run a restaurant?"

"Pretend you are in the show ring if you have to. They have fancy restaurants." Alden walked up beside Mr. Collins. "Do they have multiple floors?"

He nodded. "With escalators and elevators. Some for staff only."

The show ring restaurants were something to remember. Though she had usually eaten a packed lunch. Of course. Because Erin couldn't tolerate gluten, she had always brought food for them.

Alden waited for her. Whatever the secret he and Erin shared, he still watched after her like the best friend of his sister.

Genell.

Genell would have ran right into the building without looking back.

Tammy couldn't be that brave. With Alden and Erin beside her she could face the unknown, and her future. Someday, those people in there would be her and Erin. Waiting for a couple of scared young adults to enter and learn about their future.

She took a deep breath and stepped up beside Alden and Erin.

The door opened.

A woman dressed rather like a penguin frowned at them.

"Mr. Collins?"

"Yes. These are the young adults I told you about."

The woman made a strange noise in throat. "Come in quietly. Please don't drip any mud on our clean carpet." She pointed right at Alden.

"Sorry. Emergency at Mare Valley this morning."

The woman raised an eyebrow. "Come this way." She led them through a dark hallway into a poorly lit space filled with tables and chairs.

"Can you please turn the lights on? I want to look. I don't want to trip and fall."

The woman scrawled at her. "The lights are on. We keep it dark for atmosphere."

Mr. Collins touched the woman's arm. "I can't see my hands at the ends of my arms. We are here to observe the restaurant, and can't if there isn't enough light. Please turn on the lights you use when the health department comes."

She growled at Mr. Collins. "Okay. One minute." The woman disappeared into the gloom.

"How does anyone know if the tables are clean?" Tammy whispered to Erin.

Erin covered her mouth as she whispered. "No idea. I wouldn't want to eat in this depressed atmosphere."

More lights flickered on.

Tables were a dark brown, and matched the floor in color. It'd be easy to stub a toe while walking through. Tables were so close together chairs almost bumped, even while pushed in.

Heavy chairs leaned forward to the thick heavy wood tables. They were made of thick real wood. The seats were covered in dark red leather cushions, so thick, they were harder than a rock.

"Are we here to learn how the restaurant is run?" Tammy ran her finger along the top of a chair. It snagged on one of the cold buttons holding the fabric on.

Mr. Collins nodded. "First look around this room well. You will see things you want, and things you don't want."

"I'll take notes," Alden said.

"No secret recipes please." The woman appeared beside them.

"No. Only what matters regardless of restaurant type." Alden pulled out a paper and pen.

"What do we need?"

Tammy looked around. "Tables, chairs, salt and pepper."

"Sugar, cups, plates, bowls, forks, knives, and spoons. And that's only for the dining area." Erin walked over to a wall.

"And don't forget napkins, and pictures to create atmosphere."

"A good start. How about we check out the kitchen before they begin preparing secret recipes?" Mr. Collins walked toward a door in the back.

The grumbling woman blocked his way. "The owners aren't here. Not sure why they want the competition to view their restaurant. They didn't say a thing about the kitchen being allowed to be viewed."

"These young people will not be your competition. We will wait. Tammy choose a table to sit at."

Tammy picked a table near the odd wall door. The chairs were so heavy she could barely move them. She glanced at Mr. Collins.

What was he thinking? Why had he brought them here? This woman obviously didn't want them around.

Two figures stepped through the dark hallway into the better lighted dining area. They were familiar from the horse show ring, though she couldn't remember their names.

"Hello Mr. Collins." The taller man's voice boomed. "Glad you could make it."

Mr. Collins stepped forward. "I have Erin, Alden, and Tammy with me."

Booming voice leaned back and looked over his glasses at her. "Seen you before. Are you still showing horses?"

"Not for a while. Flora is too young."

"I'm sure Mr. Farlan can find a horse for you to show at the state fair."

Huh? Mr. Farlan had been dead for years.

"Not this year. My sister's friend is taking a college course."

The man turned to Alden. "I heard about your sister. I am sorry. Her skills will be missed on the horse circuit."

Tammy's mouth dropped. This man treated Alden as an adult. Then reduced Genell to horse skills. Of course, that was all he knew about Genell. Or herself for that matter.

Chapter 40

Those two.

The quiet one was related to Bain someway. That was who Genell had met him through. Would he remember Genell? Or her and Tammy? Aunt Sherry would be furious. Grandma Jensen would want her to pull Tammy right out of here. She blocked the man's view of Tammy.

Mr. Collins turned a quizzical look at Erin.

She didn't dare tilt her head in the man's direction. If he didn't know them already, he'd figure it out then.

"Let's sit and discuss the business of the business." Mr. Collins gestured to the empty chairs at the next table.

The noisier man called for drinks.

The rude woman appeared with a notepad. "Will it be water for the guests?"

"Let them have what they want. On me."

The rude woman stared at the man.

"She really has my best interests at heart."

"Sweet tea for me, please."

"Me also," Tammy said.

Alden looked up at her. "Yes. Sweet tea would be perfect. Please bring a pitcher and we can refill for ourselves."

She glared at him and stomped off.

The noisy man looked at the group. "I've never see her like this. However, since her son has been in jail, it's no surprise she's irritated."

"That'll do it. What's he in jail for?" Mr. Collins said.

"Breaking and entering. Trespassing. Car theft. Something about a girlfriend. Who seems to have disappeared."

Alden's hand touched Erin's leg.

Her mouth snapped closed. The woman's son could be Bain. She was about the right age. And disposition. That would explain her attitude.

"Sir, can you give us an idea of the assets we need to begin a restaurant?" Alden scribbled a note on the paper.

"Well, Mr. Farlan, you run a good farm, you should have an idea that it won't be easy."

"I do."

Erin tuned them out. This level of math and economics was too much for her to keep up with. Alden could take notes, and explain it to her later.

"Erin, why don't you and Tammy look around the edges. And yes, do go into the kitchen and check it out." Mr. Collins said.

She looked up.

The pitcher of tea had been delivered and poured while her mind roamed. She took a sip. Not the best. Too bitter. "Come on Tammy. Alden can explain it to us later."

A look of relief flooded Tammy's face. "Or Bisera can."

She held out her hand and Tammy touched it. "Let's go."

They walked down the walls and found the dimly lit sign for restrooms.

The women's restroom looked kinda normal, except dark. She pushed open the door for the men's room.

"We can't go in there." Tammy pulled away.

"We are here to explore. There will be male customers at our restaurant."

Tammy's eyes enlarged. "It shouldn't be any different than a women's restroom should it?"

Tammy had missed so much by skipping public school. Surely as a child she had caught Mark and Joe in the bathroom. All kids walked in on each other.

"Go in and see." She held the door open.

"It's too dark."

True. Tammy wouldn't learn anything here. And perhaps they shouldn't make the restrooms different. It wouldn't really matter. Alden could decide. There wasn't anywhere to put them anyway. They'd already chosen all the rooms to be dining areas. Another problem to be solved.

"Let's go to the kitchen."

They followed the wall back toward the door to the kitchen.

"Your pretty girlfriend won't be much help for you, will she?" The noisy man asked.

Erin's mouth dropped.

"I don't have a girlfriend." Alden glanced at Mr. Collins. "Erin is the best cook I know. She knows all the science that can be thrown into making anything taste excellent."

"Why did he say that?"

"Hush, go into the kitchen."

Erin pushed her through the door. That man was horrid. Thankfully, Alden had tried to tell Mr. Collins that Erin was a good cook. "I don't think he values women."

A woman peeped out of the gloom. "He doesn't. Come on into the light. What are we supposed to show you?"

Erin and Tammy followed the woman around a dark narrow corner.

On the other side was a brightly lit space. With more counter space and pans hanging from the ceiling than she had ever seen.

"Come on, I'll explain the basic setup." The woman led then to a row of counters, which turned out to be grill stoves. Sorta. Not like anything she had ever seen.

Tammy touched a pan as big as a sink hanging from a hook in the ceiling. "How many of these do you have?"

"A dozen here, and a few more in storage."

There was no place for this much at Grandma Jensen's. Of course, they could start small, and work to build it up. Only, where?

Chapter 41

The ride back to campus was silent. Once Tammy would have bubbled with excitement. No longer. Neither Alden, nor Erin would appreciate it. Perhaps their calmer style was rubbing off on her.

Too much to think about. So much to do.

She picked up Alden's notepad. There were three columns. One for each of them.

Erin's column covered the primary kitchen work. And all she'd have to do to keep it running.

Tammy's covered the upkeep of the dining room, and a few notes about the porch and parking lot. That would be more fun than cooking any day.

"You left off Mark and Joe. And Corey too. Where are they?"

Alden turned from the window. "They may help some the first few months. However, I need Corey at Mare Valley. I have to find a few new helpers too. I'm buying the next farm over."

"Not mom's."

"No. Aunt Sherry's land will remain in her family. Though I have a son of Ultimate coming who may be stabled there for a few weeks."

"Which one? I'll get to see him if I'm home."

"His second oldest is retiring from races at the end of July. He will take over his father's place soon. At the new farm."

That one had been one wiry brown colt, and had won many races over the last year. Shows were far more fun, and took more work, or at least to her they did. The jockeys who rode the race horses thought they had the harder job, even if a race did only last a moment or two.

Mr. Collins parked the car. "I thought we could eat here. I like that nicer restaurant. I've never known the atmosphere to be so odd. And the owners seemed to notice as well. Too bad we couldn't comfortably stay until mealtime."

"Maybe it's because it wasn't normal serving hours." Alden turned his pad over so the words couldn't be seen.

"Could be. Let me go in a minute before you all come in. Erin lock the doors please."

"Yes sir." Erin turned from the window to face them.

"What do you think Tammy? Can we do it?"

Tammy took a deep breath. Everything Erin had said washed over her. They couldn't eat with other people. They couldn't work with other people without being rude by turning down food. They couldn't safely pretend to eat food from others. It didn't matter. They didn't have a choice. "We will."

Alden opened his door and stepped out. "I don't want you to feel trapped. There is time to change your mind."

Something about the look he gave her was different. Not like the one mom or dad had given her when they asked if she was sure. Or even her biological dad, Mr. Darby. They had given her the searching for an answer gaze.

Alden was thinking something else.

She opened the door and swung out. "It's going to take more than us two, and you'll be so busy with the farm. I don't see any other choice. It's logical. I think."

They walked to the restaurant door. It looked like a simple place. Bright, clean, well lit, and only a few customers.

Mr. Collins waited on them in one corner. "Hey, over here."

Erin slipped into the booth beside him. "You sure?"

He nodded.

Alden slid into the booth and turned to Tammy. "Come on. I don't bite."

She smiled. He hadn't said that for years.

A waitress walked over with an order pad. "We have grilled chicken or grilled fish. Which would you like?"

Not much of an option.

"Do you have a menu?" Alden asked.

"Sorry, not today."

"I'll have grilled fish," Erin said. "May I watch how you cook it? We hope to own a restaurant someday."

The waitress smiled. "Sure, don't lean too far over the counter. Never know when Mrs. Health Department might be watching."

"Better make it fish for all of us," Mr. Collins said.

Erin followed the waitress.

Tammy looked around.

The men were quiet as she watched the dance of waitresses and customers in the tiny space.

Alden and Mr. Collins seemed to be trying to talk without words.

"I need to go to the restroom. Be right back."

She slipped out and they ignored her. It was easy to pretend she was a regular girl. At least for the moment.

By the time she came back, Alden and Mr. Collins laughed as if they were long time friends. Which, perhaps they were. Mr. Farley had known lots of business people, and Alden had inherited his contacts as well as his property.

Alden glanced at her.

Something lurched inside her throat. She hadn't eaten in hours. The bitter tea must have disagreed with her.

"Lower the tray! Your nose will end up in the water glass."

Tammy turned toward the voice of the waitress.

Erin carried a tray with teetering water glasses and a few vegetable bowls. She lowered it a few inches. "Feels better."

The waitress with a tray of dishes smiled. "Looks better. Come in for a few practice days if you like."

Erin handed the water glasses out as Tammy slipped into her seat. "I think that part will be Tammy's job. I'm afraid of dropping that big of a tray. It isn't sturdy."

The waitress laughed as she handed around plates of grilled fish. "You get used to it. She looks tiny. Tiny is sometimes wiry, which can be good for this kind of work."

"Do you own this place?" Tammy pulled her plate closer. The fish looked good. Beef would be even better.

"No. My cousin does. I help out when I can in the summer until I finish college."

"Thanks so much for fixing us a delicious meal," Erin said.

"No problem. There's a customer calling. I'll be back." She lowered her tray to her side and hurried off to the man with his hand up in the air waving.

Mr. Collins stopped with a bite half way to his mouth. "Better?"

Tammy nodded. "Much. She said only fish and chicken. I saw other customers with other food."

"Shh." Erin held her finger up. "Fish and chicken were the only thing she could easily prepare gluten free. At least she knows what it is. Most waitresses don't."

"Is gluten free that difficult? You've always cooked gluten free."

Erin laughed. "It's easy for me because I cook from whole food. Aunt Sherry doesn't buy frozen food prepared in a factory, they way

most restaurant food is. Everything other than fish or chicken here has gluten on, or in it, when it comes in the back door."

"Will we have that problem?"

Erin sat her fork down. "I don't know. I don't know."

The meal was finished in silence. The delicious food stuck to her mouth, and swallowing was difficult. A tear threatened to spill out of her eye, and roll down her cheek.

The waitress appeared with a piece of paper. "My cousin came in, so I have a moment."

She pulled up a chair. "So tell me what you have already?"

Mr. Collins looked at Tammy.

"Will we be able to buy safe food?"

"That's not exactly what she meant," Erin said.

The waitress smiled. "I understand. There are a lot of odd food safety laws. Some prevent certain types of food from being sold. Like a law that says it's illegal to sell fresh squeezed orange juice to child under 8, though you can sell an unpeeled orange to the same child."

"That makes no sense." Tammy pushed her plate away and finished her water.

"Nerena!" A voice shouted.

"There must have been some reason long ago." She looked back to the cook area. "My name is being called. Take this card. If you have questions, call me or my cousin."

Erin picked up the card. A long piece of paper was under it.

The waitress pushed her chair under a nearby table.

"What's the paper?" Tammy reached for it.

"Aunt Sherry never did take you out to eat?" Alden grabbed the paper and scowled at it.

Tammy shook her head.

"Aunt Sherry worried about her health." Erin reached for the paper. "I will pay for mine and Tammy's lunch."

Mr. Collins grabbed the paper. "No. I'll pay for all of us. We have a long journey ahead of us. Erin you may cook a good meal for us soon, as repayment if you wish."

He handed the paper to Tammy. "First, Tammy needs to see part of what her job will be."

Tammy stared at the slip of paper. Random letters and numbers danced all across the page. "I don't understand. The letters don't make words, and they are too light to read."

"We'll get another, a better example. Now, Erin, if you will excuse me."

Erin stood up. "Come on Tammy, let's wash up before we go back to campus."

Tammy nodded and slipped out to join her.

This whole restaurant business didn't seem as fun as it once had. Numbers and letters danced through her mind, much as the waitresses danced around the customer's tables. Numbers. Almost as bad as science. Worse sometimes.

If Bisera were here, she could do the numbers part. Bulgaria was too far away for their half-sisters to be. The half-sisters they had barely met.

Chapter 42

Had she missed that much in preparing Tammy for the real world? Then again, she hadn't been in a restaurant since her diagnosis either. Perhaps she had picked it up from Aunt Sherry, or a movie they watched.

Erin watched Tammy as she walked. She was still recovering from the effects of the massive glutening. Maybe that would explain it. Maybe the change in her wasn't a good change. Tammy seemed so down, and not her normal cheery self. How long would it take for her to recover?

"You want to go shopping?" She pushed the restroom door open.

Tammy shook her head. "I have to study for class." She stepped in front of Erin and walked toward Alden at the door.

Erin touched her shoulder. "Shopping used to cheer you up."

She laughed. "Not really. It was getting off the farm with Mom, you, and Genell that cheered me up. Doing something different. Now, it seems everything is different, and nothing the same. Shopping is well, dull. I don't need anything."

"That's generally the feeling for young adults your age. Just, not in the same way." Mr. Collins opened the restaurant door.

"I wish I could live on the farm forever, with Erin to cook for me. Let Mark and Joe grow up and move away." Tammy ran out to the vehicle.

Alden glanced at Erin. "Let's take her to the park with the paddle boats. She always liked that."

"Want me along?" Mr. Collins asked.

Erin shook her head. "You are so nice to help us. We need a little family time I think."

He turned away and clutched his keys tighter. "Let's go then. I'll take you back to campus. Let me know when you decide the next step."

An hour later, and they walked down the bank of the paddle boat lake. Several paddle boats rested on the shore.

"Only the blue one is available." The clerk pointed. "A party has reserved the red ones."

"Blue will be fine." Erin handed him the four dollar fee for a half hour's ride.

Alden led the way down the hill and picked out a life jacket and handed one to Tammy.

"Hey, only two people can ride in the paddle boat!" The clerk yelled.

"Only one is available?" Alden looked up at him.

The clerk nodded.

"You go. I'll watch." Alden took off his life jacket and handed it to Erin.

"I'm tired. You to go. Irwan is on a rock over there. I'll catch up with him." Tammy waved to a young man not far away.

"Who is Irwan?" Alden's hand gripped the life jacket so hard, his fingers turned white.

"One of Kari's friends. His brother almost died on a paddle boat here many years ago." She dropped the life jacket and ran over to the skinny young man on a pile of rocks.

"Think he's okay?" Alden adjusted the life jacket.

"We can watch them. There are a lot of people on the shore. If Kari introduced them, he's probably okay." She walked to the paddle boat.

Alden joined her. "I don't like seeing her with other men."

Erin laughed. "Are you jealous?"

He shook his head. "It's more than that. I should have protected Genell from Bain. I let her down. And thereby, Tammy lost her best friend."

They paddled away from the dock.

"You were busy learning to run the farm."

His strong legs slowed and the paddle boat began a slow swing. "I owe it to Tammy to do for her what I should have done for Genell. Regardless of her choice in men."

Erin slowed to match his speed. "She's like me. I wasn't interested in finding a boyfriend at eighteen. Right now, she wants a friend."

Alden looked into her eyes. "Does he? Look!"

Tammy and Irwan had put on life jackets and entered a personal owned paddle boat.

"We'll follow them from a safe distance." Erin swallowed when she thought of all that could go wrong today. All that had gone wrong, in fact.

Chapter 43

"I don't like it. I didn't like running the register at the Clucker. I made too many mistakes." Tammy tossed a rock onto the lake's surface. It skipped twice, and then sank beneath the shimmering surface.

"Did she say you'd have to run the register?" Irwan lay on his back and stared at the clouds.

"Isn't that what out front work does?" She turned to him.

His hand moved, and he half sat up. "Not necessarily. At the Clucker, yeah. It sounds more like you want a family style restaurant. With a waitress, table seater, and a cleaning person. You'll need a lot of employees if you are successful."

Tammy glanced out at Erin and Alden paddling by. "I thought I didn't want to go. Now I want to."

Irwan pulled himself up. "Well, let's go. I have my own paddleboat." He held out his hand.

Tammy ignored his hand and jumped up. "Which one?"

"That one over by the rock. Grab a life jacket."

She ran over and pulled one on. "Do you even go near the water without one?"

"Never. I can swim. With undertows, and other issues, it isn't safe. Though that's rare here."

More science talk. He was likely using it to cover up the memory of his brother's near drowning here. Where in the lake had that been? It couldn't be that deep. No asking him.

They climbed into the paddleboat and pushed off the bank.

"Since it's mine, we can go anywhere we want. Anywhere you want to explore?"

Tammy cringed. Erin wouldn't want her to take off. Kari trusted Irwan. Some anyway.

A dog barked on the shore, right outside the paddleboat area markers.

"How about over there? We can watch the dogs play."

Irwan grinned. "Good idea."

They paddled out to the dog park section.

Two large dogs swam out to greet them. From their heads, determining a breed was difficult. They weren't farm dogs for sure.

Tammy reached over and petted one.

A sharp whistle broke across the water.

The dogs turned back to the shore.

"They aren't really supposed to swim this far. Pretty though." Irwan turned the paddle boat.

A sharp tone sounded.

"Ah my brother must be here. Let's go back in." He pointed to a beeper on his hip.

Paddling had been fun. Oh well. Erin would be waiting.

When they reached the shore, it was crowded. A dozen people clamored around the main boat dock.

Erin and Alden waited near the place she and Irwan had left from.

"My brother is probably in the party crowd. He'll be here in a minute." Irwan stopped paddling, and the boat bumped the shore gently.

"Thanks for the ride. Have a great day!" She climbed out of the boat. On the shore she pulled the life jacket off and tossed it on the seat beside him.

"Did you learn to drive that car?"

Her face warmed. "I drove once. It's been pretty busy. Kari said I should drive more soon."

"You can do it! And when you want your own car, let me know."

A car? Another responsibility. "I don't know."

Alden stepped up beside her. "She and Erin do need to get a good car. You helped Kari?"

Irwan nodded. "She's nice. I know cars. Easier to recognize a good car than a good person. Take care."

He pushed off the bank and paddled back to the boat ramp.

"I don't want a car." Tammy turned to Alden. "You scared him. He's Kari's friend. I was being nice." She stomped off to Alden's car. Oh, the irony. Why did he have to be so creepy?

Chapter 44

Mark and Joe chased each other around the kitchen table.

"Wash the dishes. You have books to read."

"Don't wanna read. Wanna run." Joe threw the dish cloth at Erin.

Aunt Sherry lowered her laptop lid. "Boys. Mind Erin. Or, better yet. Choose. Weed the corn, or wash the dishes."

Mark and Joe screeched to a halt and looked at each other.

"Corn! Yapper will bark at the snakes, and we can play the battle scene in that movie we watched." Mark ran for the door.

"Be sure the corn is standing when you are done." Aunt Sherry tapped Joe's shoulder.

Yapper the oldest farm dog lifted his head and toddled after them. He had grown up with Mark. It didn't look like he'd tag along much longer. The last of Trisket's last living litter. He'd be missed. His pups were good farm dogs, though none had lived up to Trisket.

Erin took the dish cloth and walked to the sink. "Teaching them to do dishes didn't work very well."

Aunt Sherry reopened her laptop. "Give them time. You've always been so patient. Let's look at this website. Dishes will wait till they return."

"I guess we have made them stay at the books a bit more than usual today." Erin laughed.

"It did rain. I don't think they'll be able to get into the corn rows."

"They'll come in a muddy mess." Erin slipped into the seat.

"What do you think of this one?" Aunt Sherry pointed to a maroon car on the screen.

"I can't afford it." Erin closed her eyes.

"You haven't seen the price." Aunt Sherry laughed.

"I have to do it on my own Aunt Sherry. It's past time. I've known for awhile. You didn't help Kari. It would be wrong to help me."

Aunt Sherry's hand touched her shoulder. "What have you been doing all these years?"

"Staying here. Not finding a job. I was too scared."

"You washed my dishes, prepared my meals, cleaned my house, washed, dried, and folded my laundry, taught my kids, and helped raise them. Isn't that worth something?"

"It won't get me a job. Or money to pay for a car, or a place to live. What was I thinking?" She buried her head in her hands. When Grandma Jensen needed her most, she couldn't help. Not that working away from home would help.

"Erin. Look at me."

Erin looked up.

"Did you think of me as a cruel stepmother of sorts? You aren't Cinderella, no matter how many times I may have allowed you to act as such."

She shook her head again. Speaking would bring sobs.

"Have you ever needed or wanted anything?"

"No."

"For seven years now, you've had an income. We discussed it once. Though, Mark and Joe were screaming as they raced through the kitchen that rainy day."

"I don't remember it."

"I suppose not. We always gave you what you needed. Money is set aside for you, when you are ready. It isn't as much as we had hoped." Aunt Sherry moved the laptop.

"I'm sure it isn't enough to start a business."

"No." Aunt Sherry picked up her tea cup. "Want some tea?"

Erin moved to get up.

Aunt Sherry touched her shoulder. "It's my turn. And, I think it's time we were more equals here. You will be going off to college, if that's what you want. You need a good car. At seven thousand, it should be a good starter car."

Erin's mouth dropped. "That's crazy money."

"Not really." Aunt Sherry filled their cups. "It's a start for you."

"I'll have to teach Tammy to drive too."

"No."

"We will share the car."

"With a business in your future, you both need your own. Kari will teach Tammy. This might be their last summer to spend time together. Let Kari do the big sister thing one more time. It's all she asks. They both know the truth now. And they need this bonding and pulling apart time."

"I feel obligated. Tammy is more my responsibility than ever now."

"Grandma Jensen needs you."

"And I do want to be there."

"What's stopping you?" Aunt Sherry peeked over the cup rim.

Erin's thoughts crowded around her like a swirling cloud. "I don't want to disappoint her, or you."

"Go. She's waiting on you. I'll have Kari's friend Irwan check out this car."

"Do I really have that much money?"

Aunt Sherry laughed. "Come on now. I wouldn't keep my adopted daughter as a slave for seven years would I?"

"How much do I have?"

"Not sure exactly. We'll check it out soon. I'll give you all the receipts and all. It's past time you were taking care of it anyway." She turned back to the screen.

A dismissal. A friendly one though, as they always were.

Erin dropped the dish cloth in the sink.

Once she knew how much money she had, she could make a better set of choices for herself and Tammy.

"I don't like him much."

"Who, Irwan? Or Alden?"

"Irwan is kinda creepy."

"Do you know his story?"

"No."

"Have Kari tell you sometime."

Irwan, people, places, and learning at college were secrets separating Kari and Erin now. Not intentionally of course. Secrets all the same.

Tammy was with Kari, and moving on without her. Sorta. Which should make her happy. However, did that mean Tammy would start the restaurant with her and disappear? With Alden, or even Irwan?

She ran down the path to Grandma Jensen's home.

Chapter 45

"Tammy Eldridge."

Tammy looked up.

Vanara stood in the door of the college clinic.

Tammy dropped the magazine and stepped forward. This follow up visit didn't seem like a good idea. Her insides should better by now. At least, she could eat anything she wanted.

Vanara checked her weight. "Better. You've gained three pounds. Which is fine. How do you feel?"

"I feel okay."

The nurse placed her clipboard on the counter. "You're quiet. What's wrong?"

What Tammy felt should be private, not shared in public. Emotions raced through her mind faster than she could even name them.

Something brushed her hand.

She glanced up.

"Come on. There's a room over here where we can talk and no one can hear."

Tammy followed her.

This chair was more comfortable than the cold, hard plastic chairs in the rest of the clinic.

Vanara turned her clipboard over. "College can be tough. Celiac disease doesn't help. Is it the diagnosis, or more?"

"It's more. I'd rather not talk about it." Tammy's hands shook.

Vanara leaned forward. "As a nurse, I'm going to have to ask you some hard questions."

"I don't have to answer them. I think I should go home."

"Has anyone hurt you, or offered to?"

"No. It's not that." Tammy touched the desk between them. "There's too much going on."

"As long as your life isn't in danger, I can't require you to tell me. I can suggest you talk about it. I can even leave the room and leave you in privacy, if you want." Vanara leaned back.

"People would think I was crazy if they saw me talking to myself. There's a window there." She laughed.

Vanara smiled. "Do you go to church?"

"No."

"Do you understand the term, 'talking to God'?"

"I've heard it. Mom wouldn't want me." Tammy trailed off. Only, mom wasn't really mom. She was Aunt Sherry.

"I'll leave you some paper and pen. I'll be right back." Vanara stood up.

Tammy stared at a picture on the wall. The scene was one of those fancy ones with several impossibly clothed kids tumbled around a tree. Books flopped open at their feet, and a dog curled up beside one little girl.

The large family she had grown up in crumbled around her.

Had the painter imagined all those children as siblings?

Who was really who in her life?

Mom was really Aunt Sherry. Well, sorta. She had adopted Erin. And given birth to Tammy.

Mark and Joe weren't really her pesky brothers. They were not related at all. No wonder she didn't like them.

And Kari. The person she looked up to and admired most, wasn't her big sister.

Erin was her older sister.

Hot tears trickled down her cheeks.

She placed her head on the desk and wrapped her arms around it.

If anyone saw her, they'd think she had been diagnosed with some deadly illness. Or, dread of all dreads, a pregnancy. It didn't matter. The tears had to flow.

Mom, no Aunt Sherry, had not said she couldn't come home.

Home should be Grandma Jensen's now. If she would have her. It was time to leave college, and learn to cook if she really dreamed of opening a restaurant.

The memory of that cruel woman at the first restaurant they visited flitted through her mind. What if she had to work with someone like that? No way.

Tammy lifted her head.

A cup of steaming tea was barely beyond bumping range.

She sniffled.

A box of tissues sat on her other side.

After drying her eyes, she sipped the tea.

Should she leave? Or wait for Vanara to come back?

The door creaked. Vanara stepped into the room. "May I come in?"

Tammy nodded. Words weren't possible.

Vanara sat down across from her. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I think I need to call my sister."

"I can call Kari for you."

Tammy pushed back from the table. Kari hadn't been at the party. Did she know? If she had, why had she brought Tammy back to college?

"Um. No. Kari is in class. Nancy should be out of class by now. I'll go find her."

"Promise me, you aren't in any danger." Vanara held up her hand.

"No. My life is upside down is all."

"That's not uncommon. Call me if you need to talk."

"Thanks." Tammy stood up and rushed out of the room and the clinic. Nancy would be waiting for her near the library. She'd know what to say to everyone. She was an outsider too.

Chapter 46

Erin wiped the last plate dry.

Sure enough, Mark and Joe had returned a muddy mess. And didn't wash the dinner dishes.

Grandma Jensen had said little during her visit. Not even picking up her yarn. She didn't even try to rock the chair.

A tear dripped from Erin's eye. Tammy should be called.

The kitchen door opened.

Aunt Sherry walked in. She placed a grocery bag on the table. "You really should have left the dishes for the boys."

"They went to bed a half hour ago."

"So. Then they couldn't eat breakfast if they didn't wash them in the morning. They'll never learn if you always clean up after them." Aunt Sherry pulled cans out of the bag.

Erin spread the dishcloth out to dry. "I won't be here long anyway. I don't think Grandma Jensen will be either." She sat down.

Aunt Sherry reached across and touched her hand. "As I told Tammy an hour ago. This will always be your home. This is true for both of you. However, I want. No, I expect both of you to begin living in this home as Kari and Nancy do. It is your home. You clean up after yourself. And, yourself alone. Don't do other people's chores. You have enough to do getting ready for college."

"It. It keeps me busy."

"I know. Do I need to give you the list of things you need to do for you, that you are neglecting by doing Mark and Joe's chores?"

"Grandma Jensen didn't have the strength to knit. I think I need to move in. To cook for her. I don't want to leave." Erin shook her head.

"It's only a few steps away."

"Corey runs in and out working. Weavon is constantly there. And even Alden. I'd feel out place."

"I know. Alden is your biggest worry?" Aunt Sherry opened her laptop.

"When Tammy comes home next week, I know he'll say something to her."

"When Tammy comes home, you'll all be busy planning for a week before you leave for classes."

"Does Alden have to be there?"

"Do you want to ask him not to be?"

Erin closed her eyes. "No. Not really. I know he made a promise and kept it. It's. If we do start a restaurant, I don't want him taking Tammy away as soon as it opens."

Aunt Sherry laughed. "I don't think you'll have to worry about that. Tammy thinks Mare Valley is wonderful and all. However, she'll not easily leave the only family she knows. Alden doesn't really need her at the helm. How would she ever manage his mother?"

That was funny picture. The scene played out well.

"How dare you bring wheat in here!" Tammy screaming red-faced dumping a pan of gravy on the floor.

"How dare you tell my what to do in my own kitchen! I knew you before you were born!" Alden's mom scooping it up and pointing out the door.

"I don't think that would go over well."

"I don't Alden has said anything for a few reasons. Tammy isn't ready for that anymore than you were at her age. And, he doesn't really know how to speak to his mom. If anyone does."

"Perhaps Corey?"

"I think Weavon may be able to talk some sense into her soon. After she loses Alden too. Give it time."

"Where would Alden go?"

Aunt Sherry looked right at her. "To be with you and Tammy at Grandma Jensen's."

Erin laughed. "He has to run Mare Valley."

"He'll be an absentee landlord. His mom can do nothing without his permission based on the way his dad drew up his will."

"I don't like absentee landlords."

"I normally don't either. He'll be able to walk over everyday. And watch what she's doing."

"If he leaves, half the workers will leave."

"If they leave, or go on strike, his mom will have no choice, will she?"

"I wouldn't want to be reduced to losing everything. Hardly fair to Mrs. Farlan."

"No. And at your age, you shouldn't. Though you almost act as if you are willing to throw it all away to stay where you've always

been. At her age, she should be ready to hand over the day to day jobs, and relax knowing what she has built will last. I am."

"Are you tired?"

"Always. It's hard work. I didn't do it for too many years."

"Do you regret it?"

Aunt Sherry smiled. "No. I don't regret it. We would have come when my mom died. It was only a few years later."

"Or would you have sold the farm?"

The phone rang.

Aunt Sherry reached for it. "Don't think so."

"Hello? Okay. We will be there."

"Lock the house and come with me."

"Who is it?"

"Weavon."

Erin pushed her chair in and followed Aunt Sherry down the drive to Grandma Jensen's.

Weavon stood on the porch with his head down, cell phone in his hand. "We can't get an ambulance here can we?"

"Is she bad?" Aunt Sherry pushed the door open.

Weavon never answered. Or, if he did, Erin didn't hear him.

Grandma Jensen leaned back in her chair. The shawl for Tammy across her lap. The last stitches had been finished.

Erin covered her mouth.

"We have to call Tammy."

"Was she at your house?" Weavon stood beside them.

"She is with Kari. I'll go home and call. They won't recognize your cell phone. Stay with Erin. I'll get emergency services here."

Weavon sat at the table.

"She was breathing a few hours ago." Erin touched Grandma Jensen's hands. No pulse.

"I came in after finishing painting a room she requested to be a pale green. She smiled her last smile when she heard it was done." The strong man who ran Mare Valley when Alden couldn't be there, hid his face on the large kitchen table. His back heaved.

"I know she said she was ready. I didn't want her to be ready to go." Erin touched the shawl.

The door opened, and two paramedics stepped into the room.

Erin pulled the shawl for Tammy away before they reached Grandma Jensen.

Chapter 47

Tammy shuffled across the porch. Mrs. Jensen had not taught her cooking. She was gone forever. Like Genell and Trisket. Mrs. Jensen would never return. This home would no longer be that place of peace and comfort her true grandmother had created for her and Erin.

Alden opened the front door.

He always seemed to be wherever she had to go in times of trouble.

"Hi."

"Kari and Nancy with you?" Alden didn't move for her to walk through.

"They'll be here in a few minutes."

Alden lifted his eyebrow and stepped aside. "Figured they'd be with you."

Tammy laughed. "I'm an adult now. Plus they had to show Irwan the room he is staying in."

Alden stopped before the door to the kitchen. "Irwan came."

"Mom asked him to. He is taking me and Erin car shopping tomorrow. Erin is here, right?"

Alden nodded. He pointed toward the kitchen door and stalked off to the back of the house.

Sometimes he acted so odd.

She stepped into the kitchen.

The fireplace had been cleared. No fire burned. No tea kettle hummed. Tea leaves no longer hung from the rafters.

Erin sat at the table with her head down.

"Where is the tea?"

"Taken."

"What?"

"Police took it. Paramedics reported drugs hanging from the rafters of the kitchen." Erin turned away from Tammy.

"Tea isn't a drug." Tammy clenched her fists.

"Technically it is. A legal one." Erin pulled out a chair and patted it.

"Then why did Mrs. Jensen grow it and offer it to us?"

Erin shook her head. "Have I taught you so little? Anything you put in your body is a drug in one way or another. All food and liquid alter the way our body works."

"That doesn't make sense. Drugs are dangerous things."

"They also used by doctors to treat illnesses. Thing is, people don't know what is okay, and what isn't anymore."

"What do you mean? I'll miss tea here."

Erin patted her shoulder. "We'll have them again soon. I promise. We've always grown almost all of our food. However, you've gone shopping for food with Kari and Nancy haven't you?"

Tammy nodded. Those cold buildings filled with boxes and bags that hid their contents.

"Many people think food only looks like those boxes, bags, and cans. They've never seen it grown and saved in the old way."

"Mrs. Jensen was old." Tammy covered her mouth. Erin might expect her to call Mrs. Jensen Grandma now too.

Erin smiled. "Correct. Even the police who came didn't know. It was funny. They sat here at this table with a book of drawings. They pointed at the plants and named off what they weren't. The only thing they left us was the single tobacco leaf. They recognized it."

"If I'd been here, I would have stopped them." She clenched her fists. "They can't take Mrs. Jensen's things."

"They took them to a lab to prove what they are. I told them all the ones I knew. Then they took growing samples out of the herb garden."

Tammy closed her eyes. Mrs. Jensen must be rolling in her grave. Only she wasn't buried, so it would be her casket.

"They won't bring them back will they?"

Erin looked away. "Not likely. Not sure I'd trust the edible safety of them if they did. Better to be safe than sorry. I understand now why Grandma Jensen didn't want workers here, or care about a phone or TV."

Tammy squirmed. "She didn't have anything illegal did she?"

"No. She did have a prescription for arthritis that would be a strong medication."

Tammy let the air out. "So what do we do now?"

"We wait. Mr. Collins will be here this afternoon to read her will, and the burial will be tomorrow."

"I don't need to be here do I? I keep forgetting to take care of Flora when I'm here." Tammy sat up. Flora would calm her down.

"Go. Be back. You do need to be here right now."

"Will you be okay? You can send Alden for me."

Erin leaned back. "Please take Alden with you. I don't know where Flora is."

"I don't want to leave you here alone in an empty kitchen. They took all of our memories."

"We'll get the memories back. I promise. Tea will hang from the rafters again. I'll go meet Kari and Nancy."

Tammy glanced around the cold kitchen. Cold for this time of year. And no fire to warm it. Or their hearts.

"Okay." She walked out the kitchen door.

"Alden, I need to find Flora."

"You sure? Thought you had forgotten her." Alden peeked out of a room in the back.

"I'll be home soon. She's probably already forgotten me. Again."

"Follow me." Alden laughed. He opened the door and led the way down the porch that no longer creaked.

The herb garden showed few signs of having been disturbed. Only one small plant near the gate showed stress, and that was likely from the paramedics pushing it open too far.

Chapter 48

At least Tammy wouldn't be there when Mr. Collins arrived. Or Alden. How would she explain this? The police had at least not been too rude when they took all the tea leaves, and searched the house and yard. It hadn't been too difficult to keep on eye on at least some of them. Since they wanted to be sure she didn't leave either. To think of Grandma Jensen's belongings being rifled through shook her. And Tammy would have only made matters worse.

She walked down the hall and checked the rooms.

Alden had rushed to put them back together after Erin's call.

Erin walked up the stairs to the room that had once been her mother's. Everything looked right. Nothing appeared missing. She reached under the mattress and pulled out her diary. Nothing had been written for a while. Like Tammy had been unable to care for Flora, she had missed chatting with her mother in the only way possible.

She walked over to the desk and searched for her favorite pen. It was buried under a paper in the desk drawer. Erin pulled it out and stared at it.

A letter to her mother from her father.

'Dear Renea,

The pharmacy has stopped producing the drug. Trials were stopped. Please don't take anymore. We aren't sure the effects.

Love,

Claude'

Erin's hands shook. The letter was dated eight months before she was born.

What had the drug been? Why had her mother taken it? It hadn't had any effect on her, that she knew of. Grandma Jensen had never mentioned a drug trial.

A knock startled her. She looked up.

Mr. Collins stood in the door. "Nancy and Kari called Alden. They said you were here."

Erin folded the wrinkled page.

"Thanks for coming so early."

He glanced around the room and touched the doorframe gently. "Do you have your grandmother's will?"

"It's downstairs." Erin's heart fluttered. Mr. Collins didn't seem comfortable. Had the police found something after all?

"What's wrong?"

"I feel as I'm intruding. Everyone will be here soon." He stepped back.

She stepped out of the room and led the way down the stairs. It would a long afternoon.

"I'm sorry we have no tea. Aunt Sherry will bring some. Not the good kind though." Erin pushed the kitchen door open.

The room was bare. Broken almost. As if the life and spirit had removed. Not with Grandma Jensen's lifeless body. No. The spirit had only been removed when the police came, and removed all of the tea and herbs.

"How long will it take to replace everything?" He pulled out a chair. It echoed in the silence without a fire, or bubbling tea kettle.

"A while. Some of the herbs haven't been grown in a few years. Others, have to be picked at specific times. And we have to move the herb garden. I'm not sure they can all be replaced. I don't even know what all of them were." Erin stared at the empty strings hanging from the rafters. The house was empty. It had to be refilled with life.

The door burst open and Mark ran into the kitchen. "I have mint. Real live mint. Not the best. Only second best. Mrs. Jensen told me so." He dumped the strings of leaves in front of Erin. "Is it enough to make tea for all of us?"

Erin touched the leaves. They were mint. Good mint. Though a bit dry at the end of the picking season. "I think so. Where did you get them?"

"They grow wild near the stream house. I didn't want to take them all. I broke them off and left the roots to grow again."

"Can you find them again?"

Mark nodded. "Do we need more?"

"I think we can manage with these. We may need them later, when we build a new herb garden." Erin stood up to prepare a pan for the stove.

"Can we have a fire?" Mark asked.

"You'd have to bring in wood. It wouldn't be hot in time to have tea, and someone would have to stay with it." Erin turned the stove heat on. "I'm not sure I am as comfortable with wood burning for cooking and heat as Grandma Jensen was."

"I'll bring wood in. We don't have to light it. Today anyway." Mark raced out the door.

At his age, he ought to be calming down.

Mr. Collins uncovered his face. It was red.

Erin stepped closer. "Are you okay?"

He laughed. "I had to cover my laughter. To be so young and full of energy. You helped raise him well. Wood, even non-burning will help. A step in the right direction. Toss a little hot water on the cold coals once he comes back."

That would waft the smell of burning wood without the fire. A touch of home. Almost.

The kitchen was soon crowded with everyone she known all her life. With the addition of Mr. Collins and Irwan. The reading of the will was quiet. And expected. The gist was Erin received the house and land. Tammy an interest bearing trust until she was twenty-one. Aunt Sherry, Alden, Mark, Joe, Kari, and even Nancy received tokens. Gifts, some of which had already been given. Alden, Mark, and Joe all received pocket knives that Grandpa Jensen must have bought in his youth. Aunt Sherry, Kari, and Tammy received shawls.

Mr. Collins hesitated at one point. That must have been the place where Genell's gift had been removed.

Nancy sat stiff as board, thinking she had been forgotten.

Mr. Collins handed her a note. "What this note contains is your gift. Use it well."

Nancy blinked and took the note. When she opened it, she read it, and looked confused. "Guess we need to go out to the shed to see what I get."

Erin took her hand. "Come on. I'll unlock it."

"Do you want us to come?" Kari asked.

"No. Erin and I can go." Nancy stepped bravely toward the door.

Outside Erin turned to her. "You didn't think she forgot you, did you?"

"I never know. And, she may not have thought to add me. I've only been in Kari's life a few years. She only met me a few months ago."

Erin led the way to the shed. Inside was a stack of flower containers and gardening tools.

Nancy was to choose what she wanted from them. There had been an envelope somewhere from Grandpa Jensen that was to go to her as well.

Nancy gasped. "So much. How am I supposed to choose a fair amount, and not take everything of yours?"

Erin touched her shoulder. "Take what you want. I'm not sure what we'll need. Only Alden knows, and he can help us find it."

Nancy glared at her. "Don't always rely on him. He's a good person. Rely on yourself first."

Erin stepped back. Of course, she had struck a cord. Or two.

"I'm sorry. Very emotional right now. I have no where to take anything right now. Can you keep it safe here, until we have a place where we can work?" Nancy touched a basket that had curved from years of herb gathering.

"When do you plan to do that?"

Nancy turned away. "We received the acceptance letter this morning. We are going to an internship program next month. It's up north. I'm sorry." Nancy walked over to a table against the wall.

That meant Erin had no place to stay while going to college. She could never do it alone.

"We didn't want to say anything until after the funeral. It wouldn't help."

Erin gulped. "I understand."

Nancy turned toward her. "I'm sorry. This is why we made Irwan come. Once you have a car, you can travel back and forth for classes."

"No. We will have a business to build. It's okay. Maybe someday." Erin's shoulders slumped.

Nancy nodded. "Someday, classes may be online. Promise me you'll watch for them? Then you won't have to travel. Or risk food contamination."

"I will. Let's go back. Kari has to be wondering where we are."

Nancy took hand. She walked unsteadily. Not quite fully healed from the wreck that had killed Genell.

Chapter 49

A single cloud covered the sun. This darkened cloud streaked across the cemetery and stopped over Mrs. Jensen's casket.

Tammy wiped her eyes. So much was missing now. Two funerals in as many months. Three, if Ultimate counted. Hopefully he did, and no more would occur. For a long time.

Erin touched her shoulder.

"Huh?"

"Time to say our final goodbye." She stood up and walked to the casket.

Tammy followed.

The steely grey casket hung at ground level.

Men they didn't know carefully lowered it into the ground.

Erin picked up a handful of dirt, and scattered it across the lowered casket. She grabbed Tammy's hand.

Tammy reached out to take a clump of dirt. As it scattered over the coffin every clunk and ping reminded her of something she had done with Mrs. Jensen. All the things left undone. And unsaid.

She had never called her Grandma. Tears streamed down her face.

Erin squeezed her hand.

Nancy touched her shoulder.

Nancy's face said more than words could.

Even if Tammy had never called her Grandma, she had been as a granddaughter to her every day. Even now, at her funeral.

Unless something changed, Nancy would never be at the funeral of any of her family. She would never be there during their final days. To know their joys, or their sorrows.

Tammy pulled her close. Nancy needed her as much as she needed Nancy.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a haze.

That evening, she sat at the kitchen table with Nancy and Erin.

Irwan joined them after watching movies with Mark and Joe. "I feel out of place."

"Kari said you don't have much family either." Erin passed him a cup of tea.

He cupped his hands around the warm cup. "There are many of them. They are all so busy, they never see me. Or hear me."

"I thought you only had a brother." Tammy pushed her cup forward for a refill.

"Two sisters also. And more cousins than I can remember. They are noisy and active. I'm more the quiet, in the corner type. Watch and listen. Thanks for inviting me along."

Erin sat down across from them. "We need you tomorrow."

He looked up. "What kind of car do you need?"

"Something dependable, and easy to drive."

"Like Kari's new car?"

"Nope." Nancy spoke up. "You need one vehicle to share for simple driving, and one for hauling. It's tough to get a bag of anything in and out of that car. A suitcase barely fits."

"We're both strong." Tammy leaned toward her.

"Really want to wrestle a 50 pound bag out of that trunk in the rain, or snow? And if you bake cakes and deliver them, you'll need a better setup than a trunk."

"Perhaps we should wait until we have the business." Erin said. "I don't really want that responsibility anyway."

"I don't either." Tammy leaned back. Even driving Kari's new car hadn't been fun.

Irwan laughed. "I can tell tomorrow will be fun. Erin, you drive regularly, don't you?"

"A few times a week, locally. I don't like to drive far from home."

"Maybe our mom didn't like driving either. We never asked."

"Aunt Sherry would know. She was wild though, like you."

"I better go. It's time for me to meet Alden and take care of Flora." Tammy pushed her chair back.

"I'll go with you." Irwan drained his cup and pushed it aside.

"Don't you want to stay here?" Erin took his cup.

"A walk would do me good." He walked over to the door. "Lead the way."

Tammy's face warmed at his gesture to the open door. "I can go by myself."

"I don't doubt that. I'll stay if you want me to."

Erin smiled, though it was an odd smile. Perhaps, it wouldn't be wise to take him along.

"I have to take Kari a cup of tea before I go." Tammy rushed to the cabinet for a clean cup.

"I'll wait outside." The door closed gently behind him.

Erin obviously thought something was wrong Irwan. She didn't say a word. Even with Irwan out of the room.

She carried the tea up to Kari's room.

"Come on in," Kari said.

Tammy placed the teacup on the table. "Is Irwan safe?"

"Did he scare you?" Kari laughed.

"No. Erin looked at him funny when he offered to go help me with Flora."

A lopsided grin formed on Kari's face. "Do you like Irwan?"

"He's your friend."

"You went boating with him."

"I needed someone to talk to. So did he."

Kari's hands wiggled in her lap.

What could be bothering her? "Is he safe?"

"He's safe. Take Yapper with you to please Erin."

Kari patted her shoulder. "Hurry now sis. Be back before dark."

Something was wrong. Something was definitely wrong.

Mrs. Jensen, her real Grandmother, was no longer there to ask questions of.

Chapter 50

"You should have told her he was trouble." Erin washed the tea cups.

"And have her tell mom? She'd make him leave."

"What will Alden say, or do?"

Kari squeezed Nancy's hand. "It's Tammy's choice. She may not be interested in either one of them. Alden has waited for five years at least to state his interest. He needs to speak up before someone else comes along and swoops her off her feet under his nose."

Erin slammed the dish towel down. "Don't say that!"

Nancy laughed. "Irwan's interest in Tammy is about the same as mine. She is a sister. To him, she is a close friend he feels he can confide in. He may have heard Alden is interested in her, and want's to be sure he is okay."

"We know Alden's safe. He's never said a word to her." Erin fumed.

"All this time, he's waited, yes. However, all of you are on the inside, looking out. You grew up together. Irwan, like me, is on the outside looking in. Either of us would be more likely to pick up on a problem."

"You haven't seen anything Alden has said or done wrong." Erin pushed a chair under the table.

"No. I'd tell you if I did. Kari's right. Irwan will encourage Alden to speak up. Irwan's afraid to talk to most women. This might even be good for both of them." Nancy pushed her cup away.

"You sneaky, mischievous, sister." Erin held her head. "There wasn't time to warn Alden."

"Nothing bad will happen. We need to focus on you."

"Me."

"Yes." Kari looked over at Nancy.

The smile they exchanged showed they were thinking something unexpected.

"What is it?" Erin sat down.

"Nothing to worry about." Nancy laughed.

"I know I'll have to move to Grandma Jensen's soon. I don't like the thought of rattling all alone there. I'm used to here. I'm not even

sure I could have gone to college like Tammy did with both of you there."

"We know how much you like your alone time."

Erin shook her head. "I'd rather treasure it, then feel stuck there. Grandma Jensen's home needs a caretaker. And Tammy and I'll have to go there soon."

"You may not be alone long," Kari said.

"Unless you know something I don't, it'll be a long time."

Kari and Nancy laughed.

The phone rang.

Erin jumped and grabbed it. What were Nancy and Kari thinking? "Hello."

"Hi Erin, I need some recipes." Weavon's voice surprised her.

"What kind of recipes?

"Alden wants to prepare a special meal at your grandma's house for you, Tammy, and another guest. He didn't say who. In a few night's time."

"Am I supposed to bring the recipes to you?"

"No. Leave them on your grandma's kitchen table."

Erin hung up the phone. She turned to Nancy and Kari. "He is planning to tell her. And wants me to plan the menu. Doesn't he understand?" She covered her face. Her back heaved with the pain of sobs that wouldn't quite come out.

"I'm going to call the clinic." Erin stammered. "Tomorrow."

"Whatever for?" Nancy said.

"I need to donate my eggs before I'm too old to. Though no one may want eggs of a woman who can't eat wheat."

"At least not in Kentucky." Kari reached out her hand. "Wait a few days. At this point, a few more days won't matter."

Erin nodded. "Maybe I can go to where you are going, and a clinic there might be more receptive."

"Maybe." Nancy stood up. "Let's choose some recipes. Where is your recipe box?"

"Box?"

"Or book. You do have recipes, don't you?"

"They are all in my head. Aunt Sherry and I adapted them years ago."

"We need to get them on paper then." Nancy walked toward the stairs.

"Or on computer. Which would you prefer?" Kari pointed to the laptop.

"On computer, we can print them out, and fix mistakes." Nancy called from the stairs. "I'll be right back."

Erin slid the computer over and turned it on. Finding a starting point for recipes would be a challenge. How to write up for others to follow?

Kari handed her a pamphlet labelled "Bread for the Ages." "It isn't any good for your recipes. It will show how this church group wrote theirs up."

"Are you going to church now?" Erin looked up.

"No way." Kari laughed. "They wouldn't have me. They like handling out pamphlets on campus. Gets old sometimes. This one I kept. I like the rolls recipe."

Erin flipped the pages. Sure enough, it was simple. Religious sayings, a title, a list of ingredients, and directions. Sometimes followed by a drawing or another saying. A chicken and dumplings recipe looked like a good example. She opened the document program and saved a new sheet titled Recipes.

Nancy sat beside her. "What would be great at such a special dinner?"

"I don't know. I don't really want to think about it."

"We know you would rather choose him for yourself. Think about your sister. What do you want for her?"

"For once, I want to be selfish, and think about me. If he wants to do this this way, why not have you there, instead of me?" Erin looked up.

Kari and Nancy exchanged an odd glance. Kari shook her head one time.

What did they know?

"Choose one of your favorite dishes. Write it up." Nancy pushed the pamphlet closer.

Erin nodded. Chicken smothered with mushrooms and onions would be the dish she would want if a man was interested in her.

She typed a title. Her throat tightened. These recipes had to be written if they were to be used in the restaurant.

Eyes closed, she typed the ingredients list and the directions.

Meat: 12 to 14 chicken breasts.

Vegetables:
30 ounces of corn,
30 ounces of green beans.
8 ounces of mushrooms.
30 ounces of peas.
Other ingredients:
Mushroom soup (gluten free).
Dash of salt,
Spices, such as pepper to taste.
Preparation:
1. Place chicken breasts in an oven safe pan.
2. Cover chicken breasts with sliced mushrooms.
3. Pour 2 cans of mushroom soup across the top.
4. Sprinkle salt across the pan.
5. Cover with lid and place in oven at 350 degrees for one hour.

"Don't forget how many it serves," Nancy said. "If Weavon cooks it, he won't want to make twice as much because you usually cook for twice as many."

"With two teen boys, what do you expect. It's more like triple." Kari flipped through a notepad.

Erin halved the recipe and saved it under another name. "I'll make two copies. We may need even more for the restaurant."

"True," Nancy said. "This is a good start. Keep up the good work."

Chapter 51

Tammy tromped along the pathway to Genell's. Only, Genell wasn't there anymore. And, she wasn't alone. Irwan followed her.

"Wait a second," Irwan said.

"Almost there." Tammy turned.

Irwan's hand was on his chest. "Recovering from a bad cold. I can't walk so fast over terrain I don't know."

Tammy tapped her foot. "How long?"

"A moment." He breathed deeply. "Okay. A little slower now."

Tammy turned and walked down the lane. Even Alden ran this lane. She glanced back.

Irwan followed, though his mind appeared far away.

"What are you thinking?"

"How much I'll miss Kari's friendship when she goes away."

Tammy stopped and stared at him. Kari gone? The sister she had shared secrets with as long as she could remember. No. She wouldn't think about it. She shook her head and stalked to the barn where Flora would be waiting.

The door swung open to allow dappled sunlight inside. Fall would be here soon. No chill in the air. A change in the smell on the breeze signified the future season change as it whistled between the stalls.

Alden stepped out of Flora's stall. "You remembered your filly."

"I came. Irwan wanted to come too. Not sure why." Tammy stood still.

"Come on then." Alden turned away.

"I wanted to see the horses. I don't see many up close at home." Irwan trailed in behind her.

"You have everything you want. At least, Kari says so." Tammy walked into the stall.

Irwan followed. "Sure. They don't feel I need horses. I'm sure I could if I asked. I never did."

"We have horses at our place. You could have asked Kari to show them to you."

"Why isn't Flora there?"

"She isn't weaned silly." Tammy brushed Flora's coat gently.

Alden carried in a bucket of water with grain floating on the top.

"I thought you said she wasn't weaned." Irwan sat on the hay in a corner.

"She isn't." Alden held the bucket up to Flora. "The goal today is to start the process. Give her water, and some of the grain her birth mother liked. Grab some hay, and you can try to feed that to her as well."

"Um." Irwan looked at the pile he was sitting on. "Guess I shouldn't be sitting on their food."

"No. Not if you want dainty Flora to eat it. She's almost as bad as Lilly, or even Ultimate." Tammy laughed.

"Where is her foster mother?"

"She's outside enjoying the sunshine and fresh grass. Flora's kinda like me, I guess. She doesn't quite know who she belongs to." Tammy stopped brushing. She glanced at Alden. The thought hadn't crossed her mind before.

Alden had always been there for her, as well as Flora. Especially Flora, since she had neglected her. And it wasn't as if she knew. She didn't know back then, at the beginning of the summer when Flora was born. The connection to her had been strong. So strong, it had threatened Genell, and destroyed their friendship. Had Genell known the truth?

"Tammy. You okay?" Irwan stood beside her.

Alden hadn't moved from Flora's face. He kept trying to get her to drink. His face was stony and cold. Much like his father had been when Genell threw a tantrum for whatever reason.

"Okay. It's been a tough summer. Why don't you go back and have Kari show you our horses." Tammy pushed Irwan away.

He stepped back and glanced at Alden.

Alden gave a quick nod.

"May I see her foster mother?"

"I'll show you." Alden placed the bucket on the ground and led the way out.

Irwan followed him out of the stall.

Tammy touched Flora's mane. "Why won't you eat little one?"

Flora snorted and turned to her. Then, she lowered her head into the bucket and sniffed.

"Want some like Mama's?"

Flora lifted her head and looked straight at Tammy.

"Give me a minute."

Tammy took the bucket and strained the grain out. No sense in wasting it. She added more grain and only a little warm water to soak it.

Indistinct voices murmured outside.

She glanced out.

Irwan and Alden leaned on a fence and talked.

They wouldn't have much to talk about. Irwan was so different from Alden and the world she knew. She stirred the mixture to barely thinner than the adult horses were given.

Back in Flora's stall, she held some in her hand.

Flora blew at it, and lipped it up expertly.

Tammy giggled.

Cory had been up to his old tricks. Feeding the babies sugar most likely. An easy way to teach them to eat. A bad habit to give them though.

Alden returned.

"She's eating." Tammy showed him the half empty bucket.

"Good. Try some hay."

"You try."

"She's eating for you."

"Out of my hand."

He laughed. "Okay." Alden pulled out a wisp of hay and held it to Flora's mouth.

She jerked her head back and snorted.

"Guess not today." Alden leaned against the stall wall.

"Grain is a start."

"Especially since I'm not sure how long her foster mother will have milk. She's drying up."

"Guess I'll have to come over every day and feed her then."

"Now don't spoil her. In a few months we won't be able to hand fed Flora."

"I won't."

Flora nickered and pushed at the bucket.

Tammy raised it. "I don't think her head will reach that low. We'll need to make a wall feeder for her."

"I can do that. Take her outside to play." Alden walked to the side wall and touched the planks, looking for a likely spot.

Tammy sniffed. "Come on Flora. We've been dismissed." She led the way out of the stall with Flora at her heels.

"I didn't mean it that way."

Tammy kept going. Everyone kept acting so strange, and not at all like themselves.

Chapter 52

The kitchen counter shimmered in the light. The fire crackled and sparked. Grandma Jensen's favorite tea kettle gently boiled.

Erin sat at the table and waited. Mrs. Yates from the health department would arrive in an hour to inspect their place, and help them decide what else they needed to do to be ready to open a restaurant. Besides the obvious purchases on her ever growing list.

Laughter floated down the hall as Alden and Tammy scrubbed one of the rooms that they hoped would be the main dining area.

"May I come in?"

Erin looked up.

Mr. Collins stood in the doorway.

"I didn't expect you to be here."

"I can leave. Though, it'd be better if I hear what she has to say first hand, rather than second hand."

"Come on in." Erin patted the chair beside her. "I can make some tea."

"That would be nice. Do you have any of your grandma's teas?"

"I have some mint Corey picked." She stood up to make the tea.

It wasn't long before the knock on the door came.

Erin opened it, with Tammy at her side.

"What a dark and dreary place. I am Mrs. Yates." She did not hold out her hand.

"Come in and join us in the kitchen." Erin moved aside to allow her in.

"You have a lot of work to do to take down that jungle out there and make a safe parking lot for customers."

"The trees need to come down?" Erin stepped into the kitchen.

"Oh yes. And that nasty weed patch out there is another hazard. A hiding place for snakes and rabid chipmunks."

Best to not say a word. They would need this woman's help to get approved for a restaurant.

Mrs. Yates stepped into the kitchen. She snapped her clipboard. "That fireplace will have to be sealed up. You need real lighting in a kitchen. I see a small dish sink. Where is the hand washing sink?"

"Hand washing sink?" Erin asked.

"Yes. You have to have at least three business sinks. The dish sink must be separate from the hand washing only sink, and separate from the janitorial sink."

"Okay. We need to write this down. Alden, can you keep up?"

"Don't bother. I'll write the official notes." She stomped around the kitchen.

"There are leaves in these cups. Do you know that?"

"It's mint tea."

Tammy moved forward.

Alden stopped her.

"Where is the box they came in?" Mrs Yates peered through her glasses at her.

"It is fresh grown mint."

"Not good enough. Everything inside the building must be properly packed and labeled. Have you had a plumbing and sewer inspection?"

"Do we need one?" Erin stepped forward.

Mrs. Yates sighed. "I guess you know nothing about running a restaurant. We will sit and you will tell me your plan."

Tammy clenched her fists.

Alden steered her toward a seat.

Erin sat beside her sister.

Mrs. Yates pulled out the chair and sat down. "What is your plan?"

Tammy took a deep breath. "We will serve coffee, tea, and farm grown beef and vegetables. Maybe pork at some point in the future."

"Do you have certified farms to buy from?"

"Aunt Sherry is going to let us use the extra produce she usually sells."

The woman shook her head. "Not good enough. It has to be grown to order, harvested by rules, and stored properly. Do you even have a food storage place here?"

"Not yet. Right now, we are trying to get a list of what we need so Mr. Collins can help by backing our venture."

Mrs. Yates sat her clipboard down. "Look I know you are trying to do something here. You are out in the middle of nowhere. No businesses. You won't have any customers here. Not enough to run

a business. It would cost more to fix this place up than you would ever recoup."

"We have to. It's our only hope." Erin squeezed her tea cup so hard tea sloshed out.

"Tell you what. I'll make a list of what you need in a place to do business. I think you need to find a property that is already set up as a restaurant. Then, you'll only need a little remodeling."

"Do you need to see the rest of the space we want to use?"

"A good idea. The young man may show me around what you had hoped to do."

Alden stood up and walked out of the kitchen followed by Mrs. Yates.

Erin glanced up at Mr. Collins. He might give up on them now.

"She does have point. I'd rather see your grandmother's home stay a home. I have a few other ideas for it. You don't have to build a restaurant. It can be anything."

"Wouldn't we still have to follow the restaurant guidelines?"

"It depends."

"I don't like her." Tammy squirmed. "Professor never said a word about all this."

Mr. Collins laughed. "She doesn't know the specifics of opening a restaurant. They are complicated. Aunt Sherry probably should have been here. And honestly, can she keep up the farm, and produce enough for a successful restaurant?"

"How can we have the healthy restaurant we want without her?"

He sighed. "If you really want a restaurant, it would be better to have it in her home, and have her move up here with you. You'd still have the issue of not enough food. I'm afraid it would take three or four farms her size to provide enough."

"What other choices do we have?"

"Coffee and tea shops do well. Not sure how well a gluten free one would do. They'd have to be in a high foot traffic area though. Not way out here. It is a beautiful place to come home to."

"Please don't side with her."

Mr. Collins reached across the table. "I'll help you. We have to decide what will be effective. Here, it's not going to be easy."

Erin lowered her head.

"No bread! You can't have a restaurant without bread." Mrs. Yates yelled down the hall.

Tammy shook. "She's as bad as Olly."

"Worse. Mrs. Yates should know better. She's supposed to care about nutrition."

Mr. Collins drained his cup. "No. I don't think most people here have even heard of celiac disease. European countries know it exists, and are forming laws and statues to live with it."

Erin sighed. "And this backwater community will be one of the last to know. Won't it?"

"Yes. We'll think of something."

"Bisera and Dara. Or, dad's other daughters may be able to help." Tammy leaned forward. "We can email them."

"Think about it. Give me a call in a month or so." Mrs. Yates held out her hand.

No one offered to shake it.

She walked out the door without looking back.

A dream she didn't really want was lost.

Lost to reality.

A broken reality.

Even Mr. Collins had suggested major changes.

Chapter 53

The woman had been so cruel and cold. No one deserved to be treated that way. Even Erin had hid her head from the rudeness of her tone.

Tammy touched Erin's arm. "It's not what we want anyway. I don't want to lose our home."

Erin smiled at her. "We have to do something, or we will lose it."

"Why? It's ours."

Mr. Collins coughed. "You'll have to pay yearly taxes. And have money for food, clothes, and other things. Like water, computers, and electricity."

"That's not that expensive is it?"

Alden touched her hand. "More than you know, or can imagine. How much shopping have you done?"

"Very little. I was shocked at the prices at the grocery store. Of course, mom usually shops without us."

"I can give you a list of expenses for Mare Valley."

"Everyone lives there."

Alden smiled. "Yes. Mostly. However, the employees still have to buy clothes, and things they want. We have thirty two departments running the operation. We make our money from breeding horses. Without them, none of us would have anything. It's expensive. The best feed, electricity, and all the needed supplies. Our employees pay is based on room and board being covered, so they are paid less than you would have to pay an employee of a restaurant."

Erin walked to the sink and placed her cup in it. "I'm afraid we've done all this work for nothing. I'm sorry Alden."

"Erin, you did all this work for you and Tammy. This home is now habitable. Mrs. Jensen let it go for too long. I'm glad she finally accepted help. I'd have helped anytime. In fact, when you and Tammy are ready to move in, let me know. Weavon, Corey, and I will all help you." Alden stood up and pushed his chair in. "I have to go meet a client now."

"I'll email you Dara and Bisera's response." Tammy pushed in her chair. "I better go write them now."

They walked out of the home together.

"Weavon and Corey can repair the herb garden. They are planning to come tonight."

"We will need a driveway for us."

Alden glanced at it. "There was one here once. I'll find the layout and figure out where it is supposed to be."

They were almost to the path to Mare Valley.

"I'll visit Flora soon."

"I'll bring her to you when she is fully weaned." He smiled.

"Wouldn't she rather stay there?"

Alden turned and placed a hand on each shoulder. He looked her in the eye. "I wish she could. Mare Valley is my livelihood. All I know. All I, my mother, and Corey have. For the last few months, the owner of the mare nursing Flora has been charging us. We are doubly losing income. I need the stall. We've had so many losses this year. It'd be as if your family had lost almost their entire crop of corn with barely enough to feed you for the summer. With none left for fall, winter, or spring."

Tammy stepped back. Genell had never mentioned any trouble. Then again, all the trouble started with her death. And the death of Ultimate. Or, perhaps the death of Lilly. "You'll make it won't you? Couldn't you have boarded them all at mom's?"

Alden stepped back. "I should have asked. There has been so much going on. I'm sorry to say I don't know exactly where we stand right now. And I should. Weavon has had to cover for me more than I care to think about."

"Genell's death has to have been as hard on you, as on me. Ultimate was your main source of income, right?"

Alden nodded. "We've lost a few mares that the owner's wanted actual breeding, and not artificial insemination. As is, we only have a few left. His son will be here soon. Not soon enough to save this year."

"So. You need two of his sons. No. One son and one grandson for the future. Maybe another stallion or two. Like mom, you can take a few retired stallions. Maybe even have a field for mares who are bred to be riders. Not just showers or racers." The background faded as Tammy pictured neat field rows of the three types of horses side by side. The gentle riders on the outside of course. They were often failed show horses. At least in her experience.

Alden hugged her. "Thanks Tammy. That's the spirit. We'll make it through. I may have to ask Mr. Collins to help me." He let go and ran down the path.

Tammy shivered as strange sensations ran up and down her spine. Alden had never touched her before. Except as kids in play, or when caring for the horses.

The retired horse pen was down the pathway. Most of the horses were too old and tired for more than dolls to ride on. What purpose they served, she had never asked. Other than lawn mowers, of course. Why did the owners pay mom to keep them here? They never came to visit. Something to ask.

She never asked mom questions. She always asked Erin or Kari.

Kari would soon be gone.

Erin. Erin had a lot to think about too.

Mom it was.

Or, did she expect to be called Aunt Sherry now as Erin called her?

Tammy took a deep gulp of air and walked head held high to the only home she had ever known.

Soon, it would no longer be her home.

Chapter 54

Erin opened the kitchen door to Aunt Sherry's home.

"I need to contact that waitress." Tammy tapped at the keyboard.

"What waitress?" Aunt Sherry said.

"The one at the diner we ate at. She was nice. It's an idea."

"Tell ya what. I need to do some shopping. If you'll drive, we'll swing by and you can see if she's working?" Aunt Sherry stepped out of the family room.

They hadn't realized she had stepped in. Or, they didn't acknowledge her.

Mr. Collins car started up. His tires crunched down the lane.

Tammy turned to her. "Bisera and Dara said to run the restaurant from here. We can own it, with another partner, and only have to go in occasionally. So, we can grow the food here, and the herbs at our new home, and supply our restaurant with food and recipes."

"So you have it all figured out? What about Mr. Collins? Will we need his help?"

Tammy nodded. "It's a lot of work. However, I have to go help Alden with Mare Valley for a few months. I know why his mom his gotten so mean lately. I've been selfish. And there isn't much we can do for the restaurant until next planting season, other than planning."

Aunt Sherry laughed. "Planning will be enough I'm sure. Want to go?"

Tammy looked at her. "I don't want to drive. I will. If Erin can sit up front with me."

"Now wait a minute. If we all go, who is watching Mark and Joe?" Erin crossed her arms.

"Corey came and took them to Mare Valley for the day. Call Alden please and remind him to keep them there until we get home." Aunt Sherry closed her laptop and walked into the front hallway.

"Guess I have to drive now." Tammy gulped.

Erin held out her hand. "You'll do fine."

"It's still scary. I see that tractor, and Trisket, every time." Tammy closed the laptop.

"I should have made you get back up on that horse that day."

"I'm not scared of horses. I can ride them anytime. Even drive the horse buggy." She looked at the table.

Too much pain for an eighteen year old. "A horse has a mind of it's own, and could see to prevent an accident as well as you."

Tammy looked up. "Ultimate didn't."

Erin closed her eyes. No one knew what had gone through Ultimate's mind that night. Because he was rambunctious, Pandy always held the reigns close. Perhaps too close for him to escape from Genell's wrath. Or, perhaps he gave his life to protect Pandy.

"I have a shopping list." Aunt Sherry returned into the room. She glanced at them both.

"Come on." She touched Erin's shoulder as if she were a little girl to steer her toward the door. A comforting touch in a moment she needed a guide.

"Sis, bring some paper and a pen. You drive. Tell me the recipes you want us to use in our restaurant. And the teas we should recreate."

Tammy nodded and picked up a notebook and pen.

At the car, Aunt Sherry handed Tammy the keys. "You said you'd drive. Go on."

Erin climbed in the passenger seat. She had driven more than ridden for the last few years. Out of place to be here. The doors were heavy, and the carpet soiled. A rusty door handle. She glanced at Aunt Sherry.

Tammy sat in the driver's seat. "Where to first?"

Aunt Sherry shuffled in her seat behind Tammy. "Let's go to the restaurant first. Then to pick up a few items at the store. It's almost shoe buying time again."

Tammy shook. "What are we doing now?"

"What do you mean? You are driving to the restaurant you ate at." Aunt Sherry buckled her seat belt.

"I mean. About money." Tammy turned to face Aunt Sherry. "We don't have any do we? We have to move. I know we do."

Erin glanced back as well. It was a good question. She knew there was money for a while. Not for a year or more though.

Aunt Sherry sighed. "Neither of you are going to starve, or go without shoes and clothes. I'm not giving you a trash bag to fill with your belongings and turning you out of the only home you know. I know people have done that. It's not going to happen. You are part of my family by my choice. Stop worrying. Give yourselves a year to get the restaurant business going. Whatever choice you make. In the meantime, I will help you as I can. In a year, we'll re-evaluate how much help you still need. And that's a year from the time you open the restaurant. Not today. Not last month. No more talk. Drive."

Tammy stared at Erin. That was likely the longest speech Aunt Sherry had ever made to either of them.

"I'll need directions." Tammy turned on the car.

"Not this soon I hope." Aunt Sherry grinned as she gripped the arm rest.

"The first turn off the main road I think." Tammy turned toward the city.

Erin opened the notebook. The lines waved as the car sped down the road. "What recipes?"

"What will we focus on? If it's coffee and tea, people will expect desserts. We never had those often."

"We don't grow the ingredients for desserts." Erin wrote coffee and tea on the list. "I'm not even sure we could make desserts."

"Do you think people expect them?"

"Yes. If they've eaten gluten all their lives without knowing what it was doing to their bodies. Honestly, I thankfully don't remember it well."

"Tammy, can you drop me off at that store over there?" Aunt Sherry spoke up.

"Which store?"

"The one with the grain sign. I want to check something out."

Erin smiled. That was the store Aunt Sherry bought some special grain to try to make Erin a birthday cake several years ago. It had been hard as a rock. She had laughed it off as being out of practice. Perhaps they would have some ideas. Or new grains to try. "Do you want us to wait?"

Tammy stopped the car in front of the store. "I'm not good at parking."

"Go on. It isn't far now. I'll be here a while." She stepped out and waved to them.

Tammy waited until she was inside before pulling away from the curb. None to gentle. The car swerved almost into an oncoming van. "Sorry."

"You need more practice," Erin said.

"How much further to the restaurant?"

"Not far. I can drive if you want me to."

Tammy gritted her teeth. "I have to learn it. I can't be dependent on Mom, you, or Kari forever."

True. She'd have to learn. She didn't have to do it all at once. "If it's busy, pull to the front, and I'll park."

"Okay." Tammy steered around a pothole. "It's not as easy as it looks. Guess I should have played Mark and Joe's driving game. Never could stand the sight of it."

That game. Aunt Sherry had bought it right after the tractor accident with Trisket. She had always done her best to help them both, unobtrusively as much as possible. Now, she was doing something else to help them.

Erin's eyes filled with tears. There had to be something she could do for Aunt Sherry. If not now, someday.

Chapter 55

Tammy pulled into the restaurant parking lot. It wasn't too full. She choose a space near one end, with no other cars close. The car slid gently into the spot and she hit the breaks as the bottom of the bumper scraped the sidewalk.

"Not bad." Erin opened the door. "Between the lines okay. At least from this side."

"You always taught me to color between the lines." Tammy let go of the wheel. Color crept back into her fingers.

"Our lines were different than everyone else's." Erin stepped out of the car.

"I didn't know that. Not then." Tammy pulled out the paper. Nerena. She should be easy to recognize with her smile.

They hurried into the diner.

The man behind the counter glanced up at her. "Table or booth?"

"Actually, we are here to speak to Nerena please. Last week she asked us to come back."

"Cousin should be back soon. On break. Would you like a drink?" The man wiped the counter and pointed to a booth in one corner.

"Hot tea please." Tammy walked over and sat down.

"Same please." Erin followed.

In a few minutes the man brought a tea pot of hot water and two tea cups. Beside them were three packets of flavored teas. "I also have plain black tea if you prefer."

"Chamomile tea. Perfect." Tammy tore open the packet. "It doesn't look like Ms. Jensen's chamomile."

Erin laughed. "Course not. It's processed. What Mrs. Yates would expect us to use."

"You've met Mrs. Yates?" The man asked.

Tammy nodded. "She told us to forget our dream of a gluten free restaurant. It's all we can do."

The man turned to the door. Few customers were in the restaurant. "Nerena will be here soon. She will help."

"Mom will worry about us." Tammy stirred the teacup.

"I don't think so. She knows people in town. She knows where we are."

Tammy glanced back at the man.

He stood behind the counter writing something down. Different. That's what he was. Plain different. Not like anyone she had ever known. There was an air, like Weavon about him. Though, not similar in any way she could recognize.

The door opened again. A bell rang.

"Nere, you have guests." The man pointed toward them and handed her a paper.

Nerena turned and saw them. "Be right there. Have to put up my pack."

In moments, she had joined them, pulling up a chair. "Tell me."

Tammy shared the whole story of Mrs. Yates. It wasn't pleasant.

Nerena nodded and covered her eyes a few times.

"I have to help us. So I can help Alden. With all the help he's given us, he's let his own business at Mare Valley suffer. It's my fault. I should have demanded to help him, instead of going off to college."

"What are you talking about?" Erin said. "He hasn't said anything to me."

"He told me after Mrs. Yates left. On the walk back." Tammy told that story too.

"Mare Valley, you say." Nerena shuffled in her seat when the door opened.

Her cousin waved her to stay.

"Regulars. He can take care of them. What do you want from me?"

"What do you think? Can we do it?" Tammy leaned closer to her.

"I'll get a tea cup and let my cousin know I'll be here a bit." She left quickly.

"I'm not so sure we should make a decision without Mr. Collins here." Erin poured more water on her teabag.

Nerena returned to the table with a teacup and a fresh pot of boiling water.

"Mare Valley. One of my horses is stabled there. I should go out and see her. Are they treated well?"

"Oh yes. I enjoy working there so much! It's been a rough year."

She nodded. "So I heard. Do you think any horses suffered as a result?"

"Oh no. I think feeding time was delayed a few minutes because of Ultimate's funeral. Other than that, I'd say not at all."

"A few minutes never hurt anyone, right?" Nerena stirred her cup of peppermint tea.

"It shouldn't. They are well fed and cared for."

Nerena sipped her tea. "What you have in mind is going to be complicated. And, we have to get around Mrs. Yates and her incorrect knowledge. Though, she'd call it common knowledge."

"How do we do that?" Erin asked.

"I want to be a restaurant manager like my cousin here. He's from Italy. I can't manage this restaurant though."

"Why not?"

"I can't have gluten either. And he wants to make it a full Italian restaurant."

"Ouch." Erin looked at her. "I'm glad he's working with you."

"It's getting hard. Even as a waitress, I sometimes get cross contamination. I'm taking courses in college to run my own business, and will go to a chef's school soon. Though, not sure how. They are all gluteny. I'm afraid it might kill me." Nerena closed her eyes and sat her cup on the table.

"That's why my mare is still at Mare Valley. I can't touch, or breathe in her food."

Tammy gasped. "You mean, my working there could be a problem?"

"Only if you feed them. Now, how to get past Mrs. Yates."

"She said you couldn't have a meal without bread. We never eat bread." Tammy poured more hot water in her cup. A few drops splashed on the table.

The door tinkled as it opened.

Tammy glanced at it. Mom, no Aunt Sherry, had walked in. Calling her Aunt Sherry felt wrong. At least she didn't expect it. "Over here."

She joined them. "News?"

"We were discussing how to create meals without bread to please Mrs. Yates."

"I have some emails to write to get answers for that. There are a few companies beginning to make gluten free flour mixes. It's not easy. We can learn it. Now, what's the plan?"

Nerena glanced at them. "If we can set up for you to grow as much of the food as possible, I'll gladly manage the restaurant. My cousin would be happy too. Sadly, we'll have to appeal to the younger, health conscious crowd at first. Probably on the college campus."

"Ugh. I'll never forget the Clucker!"

Nerena laughed. "It's a nasty place. Mrs. Yates has tried to shut it down a few times. Do you have a business plan?"

"Professor liked my business plan. Mrs. Yates said it wasn't half complete."

"I'm not surprised. I think we can do it."

The door opened and the bell rang again.

"I have to go now. Call me tomorrow." Nerena pushed her chair under a nearby table.

"Guess we better go." Erin stood up and walked to the front.

Tammy followed, with her mom right behind.

Erin walked up to pay.

The man leaned over and said, "It's on the house today. I hope you help my cousin. Customers think she's perfect. They don't see pain she suffers."

"We'll do what we can. We have to make it safe for her to have her horse again." Tammy touched the counter. No bread crumbs visible. They could be too small to see. She wiped her hands on her pants, and followed Erin out the door.

Chapter 56

The next several days were busy. Irwan and Kari managed to get the new vehicles to Aunt Sherry's home. Only, there were three.

Erin had chosen a dark grey boxy car for herself. There had been plenty left over for Tammy to choose.

Tammy chose a red car, small, and not as boxy.

When Kari and Irwan arrived with the third vehicle, Erin was washing dishes, and planning to pack for the move.

This vehicle was a teal color.

Kari parked it and ran into the house. "Here is mom's new car."

"She needs one. I didn't realize how bad hers was."

"It'll be good enough for the farm. And Mark will probably learn to drive in it. I think Corey will learn in it first."

"As much as Mark drives a tractor, he should be fine." Erin hung the dish towel up. There wasn't much to say.

"Tell mom I'll be back this weekend. I have to pack everything I'm taking."

"How soon do you leave?"

"Sunday. It'll be a long drive."

"We'll probably move Sunday too."

Kari placed a stack of plates where they belonged. "Let's get you and Tammy moved Saturday. We'll bring Irwan. It'll be like one big party."

"I'll see what she says. Poor Aunt Sherry. Her home will seem so empty."

"With Mark and Joe running in and out?" Kari laughed. "Three different brands of car in the drive. And none of them ones dad would like."

"Are they different? I thought they were all the same."

"And you study science? Cars are as different as plants, rocks, or genes. Even if we can't see the difference."

"Where did Irwan go?"

"He took something for Flora to the barn where she will be moved this weekend too. I don't know much about horses. I guess about as much as you know about cars. I better go. Write often." Kari hugged her before she walked out the door.

Kari and Nancy would be somewhere studying genetics together. She and Tammy would move this weekend. And next week, food handler's classes would begin. A week of training for what seemed a far off dream. So far out of reach, she didn't dare think about it.

Kari drove away with Irwan at her side.

There was always something to clean. Not today though. She had promised Aunt Sherry to go to the attic and look through some of the old boxes stored there.

The attic steps stuck as she pulled them down. Another note to add to Aunt Sherry's list to do. Mark and Joe could oil them later. It was time they learned how.

At the top of the stairs the pull down light cord bounced.

She pulled it gently.

Light flickered on. More lights would need to be turned on.

The rafters had names painted on them. Sherry was painted next to the door. Her area was neat and tidy. As if she had been there the day before.

Kari's section was packed full of boxes from a forgotten childhood.

Erin's corner only held a few boxes. Those few memories she had kept and not passed on to Tammy.

Mark and Joe's sections were as messy as Tammy's. In fact, they flowed into one another.

Erin smiled. The older, neat and prim side of the attic clashed with the younger, more scattered side.

She pulled out a labelled box and sat under the central bulb. Inside the cardboard the box was a smaller wooden box. It had been something her mother had left for her that she had never opened. The carved wooden box was covered in pictures of horses and cactus.

Erin gently lifted the lid. Nestled on red felt was jewelry. A turquoise necklace, two smaller necklaces, a ring, and a pair of earrings. They would be nice if she ever went to fancy party. She sat them aside. Perhaps Aunt Sherry would take them as a gift for all she had done for them.

The next box held old clothes. Some had been nibbled by rats.

"Erin, you up there?" Tammy yelled.

"Come on. You're supposed to go through your boxes too."

Tammy clattered up the ladder steps. "I had to take care of Flora. I really don't want to go through all of this."

"Did you go through it last year?"

"Um. No. I went to Genell's instead."

Erin peered at her side of the attic. "How many years did you skip?"

Tammy picked up a box. "Can't we donate it all?"

"Not without looking at it."

Tammy sighed and sat down. "I'll be here a week."

"I'll go find Mark and Joe to help us carry everything to our room."

"It's already full. Can't we take it to the family room?"

They were leaving in a few days, and it would be closer to the vehicles. "I think so. Lighting is better down there anyway." Erin climbed down the stairs carrying the jewelry box.

Tammy was already out of sight yelling for the brothers.

Chapter 57

Tammy slipped into a front row seat in the ice cold room. The room looked a lot like the Professor's room. Only, way too cold. "I should have brought a coat."

Erin laughed as she sat beside her. "I think so too."

It shouldn't be this cold in the summer. Outside was a nice temperature, with a sunny sky.

Several other people were in the room. Most sat in the back.

A tall thin frowning female stalked into the room. She took the place at the front. "There will be no talking, no questions, and no warnings. Listen and learn, and then a written test. Followed by two days work in the prep kitchen to show you know what you are doing."

Tammy's jaw dropped. Professor was more respectful than that. She glanced at Erin.

Sweat sparkled on Erin's forehead.

Tests. Something Erin hadn't done since she was a child. Professor had only given papers, so even Tammy hadn't taken a test. Genell's stories about tests had been rather disheartening.

She scribbled notes quickly as the trainer talked. Half the things she said didn't make sense. Keep meat about 165 degrees? That couldn't be safe to eat. It'd burn the mouth.

The memory of a cup of tea that scalded her tongue made her shiver.

"Break time. There are doughnuts in the kitchen. Be back in five minutes."

The other people stood up and followed the trainer out of the room.

Erin and Tammy stayed in their seats. Five minutes wouldn't be enough time to stretch their legs. No need to face food they couldn't eat.

The trainer stepped back in. "You two. Come on and eat doughnuts. You need to move around, or you'll fall asleep."

Tammy glanced at Erin.

Erin nodded.

They stood up and walked into the kitchen area, careful to keep their distance from the others.

One woman came over and pushed a doughnut in Erin's face. "You need the energy."

Erin pushed her away. "Sorry. Can't have bread. It's dangerous."

The woman laughed. "What else do you eat?"

"Meat and vegetables."

The woman laughed and walked away. "More for me then." She took a bite of her doughnut.

Tammy drank from her thermos. A warm tea. "I wish we did have something we could eat."

Erin leaned against the wall. "That's the only problem with gluten free foods. They are difficult to carry out and about."

"Mom will have food for us when we get home."

"Sure. I'm concerned."

"Bout what?"

Erin glanced at the kitchen. "What foods are they going to expect us to handle tomorrow? Can we do it without getting sick?"

Tammy gulped and closed the thermos. "It usually takes a few days for symptoms to appear, right?"

Erin nodded. "I may be fine for the two days. Then, you won't be able to stand me after that. How about you? You were diagnosed only a few months ago."

"We could wear a mask."

Erin laughed. "Don't think our trainer would appreciate that. She'd think we had something contagious. And don't forget your arms. If it gets on the skin, it can be rubbed in. And we know your skin reacts to it."

"At least to gluteny grease."

The other students chatted and munched doughnuts, oblivious to where the crumbs landed.

"Or, even on our clothes." Tammy turned back toward the door. "I guess we didn't think through the dangers."

"Well, we'll be through it soon." Erin walked back to the classroom and took her seat.

If we pass the tests. Tammy followed. It wasn't a good thought.

The afternoon sped by. More notes. More worries. With every word Tammy wrote, her hand cramped. Before long, bread crumbs and lines danced in front of her eyes.

"A quick break, and then the test. Be back ready in ten minutes." The trainer left the room.

Tammy stood up and stretched. At least this part would be over soon.

When the trainer came back in the room, she carried a sheaf of papers. "Put away your notes. Don't look at them during the test."

Tammy put her notes under her chair. That wasn't good. How could she prove she knew how to find the answers if she wasn't allowed to access them? She glanced at Erin.

Erin's face was pale as she glanced at the white sheet.

"No talking. No sharing. No cheating." The trainer walked back to the front of the room. "You have thirty minutes. Hand in your paper and leave when you complete it."

Tammy stared at the questions. They danced before her eyes.

She wrote one answer and hoped it was right.

A few people handed in their papers and left.

"Fifteen minutes."

Tammy filled in more answers.

"Time." The trainer stood in front of her and Erin.

Erin handed her the sheet.

The trainer sighed. "You didn't put your name on it. Didn't you learn that in school?"

"We home schooled due to food allergies." Erin grabbed the page back and scribbled her name on it. "I'm sorry. I forgot."

Tammy blushed and wrote her name as well.

"Wait here."

A few other people handed their pages to the trainer and left.

After everyone left she turned to Erin. "Peanuts or coconut?"

"Gluten."

"What?"

"Gluten is in wheat, and many other grains and products."

"Anaphylactic shock?"

Erin shook her head.

"Hives, mood swings, mouth sores, and other digestive issues. Tammy was only recently diagnosed."

The trainer sighed. "What are you doing here then? Restaurants are about grains."

Tammy leaned forward. "We have to eat somewhere. We have to work somewhere. We plan to have a nice restaurant without grains."

The trainer laughed. "Good luck." She turned away. "Oh, and don't come in tomorrow. I don't want you getting sick."

"Are you failing us?"

She turned back. "I'll contact you. We will do an individual training with a few hospital workers I know who need to update their certificates." The trainer left the room.

"Well, I guess that is all we can do." Erin picked up her papers and walked out of the room.

It wasn't fair. Tammy stood up and followed her. They had worked so hard to only be put off again.

Chapter 58

This was turning out to be the most difficult thing Erin had ever done. As much as Tammy's brazen argumentative style drove her nuts, without it, she couldn't have said a word to the trainer.

Tammy was rubbing off on her. Something Alden had said would happen.

At least the trainer had sorta understood.

The following morning, she called.

"Erin Darby, I have a plan for you. Next Monday, you and Tammy may come for your training. We will begin with the cleaning part, to be sure no crumbs are left over. Be prepared."

"May I ask a question?"

"Okay."

"A waitress we know wants to join our restaurant. May she come with us?"

"Sure. Might be a good idea."

Erin quickly ended the conversation and called Nerena.

"Can you be there Monday?"

"I'll be there. Don't worry. She's not as gruff as she lets on. She has to be sure people know what they are doing. Sometimes, I wonder how long it lasts once they are in a restaurant."

"Shouldn’t it last?"

Nerena laughed. "There's that problem. Follow the written rules, or the spoken rules. Would you really cook that way at home?"

"Some of the things she said were more involved than what I do."

"So, we'll go to training Monday. On Wednesday, we'll discuss. Sound good?"

"See you then." Erin hung up. There was a lot to do in a few days. She and Tammy were settling into their new home. Some things were still out of place. And what to do with the empty rooms if they didn't have a restaurant here.

The phone rang again.

"Hello?"

"I'll be up shortly." Alden said. "Mom is going nuts about something. And scaring the farm hands."

The phone clicked off.

Alden's mom was always fussing about something.

She went out to the porch to wait.

Alden and Corey soon appeared carrying piles of paper.

"I have work to do. I'll use that room with the desk, if it's okay."

"Do you need help?"

"Corey can carry it in. Then he has to go back to the barns. I need to talk to Tammy soon."

She looked up at him.

"Take this on in." Alden handed the pile to Corey.

Corey gave him a look and went in the door.

"I need her to help out. I need to hire a couple of people. Mom is sending Corey to public school. And he won't be there either."

"What?"

"Yeah. I don't know what's got into her. Dad would never approve. He left the farm to me."

"That's not good."

"I think he knew she'd run it into the ground. If you aren't going to use the extra room, can I move my office here? I can't pay rent at the moment." Alden sat beside her.

"As if we'd ask you to." Erin laughed.

"It's a business expense. I actually need it as such. Only, give me a month."

Corey opened the door and came back out. "I'm going home now."

"Will you miss working the barns?"

"I want to be an accountant. Not run a horse farm. Alden likes it. So it's his." Corey ran down the lane.

"The new phone line works well?"

"Enough for the phone and internet. Some anyway."

"I'm going to ask Tammy to go into town. Weavon's cell phone is showing it's age, and you both need one. She'll pick out a good one for you."

"I don't need one."

"Yes you do. Here by yourselves. You won't always be able to go offline to make a call. If someone needs to call in, they need to be able to reach you. Plus, you'll be doing business work wherever you are."

"I hadn't thought about that. Another expense."

"Right now, it'll be trade. I can add two lines for almost nothing. We can work out the business expenses and such tomorrow. It'll work."

"Tammy is at Aunt Sherry's."

"Are you going down there?"

"The boys are on a field trip today. I'll send Tammy up when she finishes what she's doing."

"Okay." Alden walked into the house.

She stayed on the porch a few minutes. No rush. The boys would be finishing chores.

A cell phone. Another cost. One she didn't want. And couldn't afford.

Alden opened the door. "Mr. Collins is on the phone."

Well, it would make some things easier.

She hurried inside to talk to Mr. Collins.

Chapter 59

Flora nibbled at the grass at her feet.

Tammy brushed her.

The foal was doing well after such a rocky start at life. There had to be a reason so much had happened. She snorted.

A fly likely flew up her nose.

She stepped forward, her foot landing where her mouth had been a moment before.

How many people and animals had walked on the grass that fed her?

Tammy shivered. Yuck. I don't want to walk on my food.

Choco barked, ran under the fence, and up to her.

She rubbed his head. "Is Corey with you?"

He turned his head and barked.

Flora snorted and ran across the field.

Choco followed at her heels.

If only life were that simple. Tammy took the brush to the stall and hung it on a rusty nail. Alden would fuss at her for not keeping it pristine.

She walked down the path to where she had parked her car. It was small, red, and built for speed. At least, that's what Mark and Joe had said. Before Mark had gone off into a spiel about the history of the vehicle and it's builders. The only part that she remembered, was the nearby factory it had been built in was only two years older than she was.

The car gleamed. Mark and Joe had washed it and waxed it for her. Without asking. They'd expect her to take them places once she had her license, much as she had expected Erin and Kari to take her places. On the rare occasions she wanted to be away from home, and Mare Valley. Of course, the boys travelled, and expected to travel, far more than she did.

Mom walked across the porch. "Ready to test for your license?"

"Not really."

"Better before the snow flies."

Tammy grumbled. "What about Mark and Joe?"

"They went on a field trip today with a homeschool group. We've plenty of time."

"We can go, if we must."

Mom nodded. "I think we should. I'll get my purse You need to go get your records."

"Records?"

"Your birth certificate and social security card. You had them to get your permit." Mom tilted her head and looked at her. "You do know where they are?"

"Um. Let me call Erin."

Mom held out her arm. "Come on in then."

Tammy walked up for a hug. Something rare and special in their home. As it was before the changes.

"Thanks Mom."

Her mom hugged her close. "You'll always be my daughter. Now go call your sister."

Tammy laughed and raced to the phone.

"Keep better track of your records from now on!"

"I will." Tammy dialed the new phone number. It was busy.

"Guess I need to run up there and ask her."

Mom walked back in from the family room. "Busy?"

"Yeah."

"Check your desk upstairs."

She gulped. The room was empty. Joe had said he wanted to move into it, and have a room of his own. Mom had told him to wait a few weeks.

She walked up the stairs slowly. Not sure she wanted to see if he had listened or not.

The door was open.

The furniture was there. No covers on the bed. No clothes, shoes, or pictures scattered about.

Tammy gulped and opened the desk drawer. Her papers were there as mom had said they would be. She grabbed them and ran down the stairs banging the door as she did.

Her mom smiled at her. "You'll do fine. Let's go."

Tammy walked to her car and opened the passenger door.

"Nope. You have to drive." Mom said right behind her.

"Don't you have to drive me there?" Tammy walked behind the car.

"If I drive you, they'll think I don't trust your driving." She closed the door.

Tammy turned the key. "I don't back well."

"You'll do fine."

She put the car in reverse and backed around the corner into a stack of hay.

Quite a bit of loose hay fell onto the car.

"We'll get it later. Go on." Mom glanced out the window. "It isn't much."

She put the car into gear and drove to the road. "Tell me what it was like taking Erin to get her driver's license."

"Quiet. She was shy. Determined to get her license no matter what, so she could take the driving chores from me."

"It was a long time ago."

"Five years. In some ways, it seems longer. In others, only yesterday."

Tammy braked hard at a yellow light. The driver behind them honked a horn. "I had to stop."

"Some people are in a hurry."

"Nancy sometimes was. She tried not to show it. Will she and Kari come back? They never did say."

"I think they will. Someday. Oh, they'll be home for holidays and such. To live, it will be a while. I wish them luck."

Tammy turned to her mom. "I'll miss Kari. And Nancy."

"Light's green. I know they miss you too. Even if they often saw you as the pesky little sister, like you see Mark and Joe as pesky little brothers."

Tammy pulled away and turned into the driver testing lot. This would be a challenge. If Nancy, Kari, and Erin could do it, so could she. She turned the key off and gripped the wheel.

Her mom touched her hand. "Don't take Mark and Joe everywhere they ask you to. In fact, you don't even have to tell them you get your license today. Let them see you drive off on your own, when you are ready."

"I guess I'm as ready as I will be. Let's go." She opened the door and stumbled out. Not good, considering she was going in for her driving test.

Chapter 60

The note on the kitchen table told Erin that Aunt Sherry had taken Tammy for her license. Or rather, Tammy would have to drive to test for her license.

Her hands shook as she placed the note back on the table.

Alden was right. It was a new world. They were going to make it on their own. Aunt Sherry couldn't hide them anymore. Somehow they would make it.

She scribbled a response. "Okay. Let me know. I may go out."

The house was silent except for a clock ticking. Something she once longed for. Now, it felt heavy with grief as Aunt Sherry watched her family grow up, and leave her behind.

Erin ran down the lane to her own home.

The gate banged shut behind her.

Alden would think the sound was Tammy. He stepped out on the porch. "Anything wrong?"

Erin shook head. Her breath would have to slow to speak. "You're right. Let's go get the phones. It'll be a nice surprise for Tammy."

He grinned. "Let me close up my papers and computer."

"I'll let Mr. Collins know. We can met him at the diner. He had something to discuss."

"You driving?"

"I can. Meet you at my car." How long had Aunt Sherry and Tammy been gone? Hopefully she and Alden wouldn't pass them in the driveway.

Before long they had picked out two cell phones. Plus the one for Weavon. His came with an extra heavy duty case.

When she pulled into the diner parking lot, she recognized Mr. Collins car. Her heart beat a little faster. He might have decided to no longer help them, with all their problems.

"I don't know what he wants to say."

"Probably something about the dinner."

"It's too soon. We only moved in four days ago."

Alden laughed and opened the door. "You don't have a house warming party a month after you move in. Come on now."

Erin followed. If Tammy could face her driver's test today, surely she could face Mr. Collins, and the threat of losing their financial support.

Mr. Collins sat in a corner talking to Nerena.

Alden led the way forward. "Hello Mr. Collins. Nerena, are you ready for the training?"

"It was rescheduled to next Monday. I'll be there."

"It was. The trainer decided we needed some time to rest after moving. We didn't move that much."

Nerena laughed. "Actually, she wanted to do a little research, and have a large enough group to make it worth her while. Plus, yesterday, she was re-certifying a group of school cafeteria workers whose certificates had expired in May, and they didn't realize it."

"So you talked to her?"

"Yes I did. We had a good conversation. In fact, she asked for your Aunt Sherry's number, so she could verify the email addresses she collected on your last visit."

"I forgot Aunt Sherry was looking into those companies."

"Nerena." Her cousin called as the bells on the door rang.

"I didn't. I think it's a great idea." Nerena walked over to serve the new customers.

Erin glanced at Mr. Collins. Her stomach jerked again. "We bought cell phones on Alden's line today."

"Good idea. I've been taking with Nerena too. She has a place picked out. Have you seen it?"

"She hadn't told me."

"I don't think she knew for sure until today. I've been to see it. It's on the campus, and will take a lot of work. Mostly cleaning. Plumbing, lighting, and basic restaurant setup, including cooler, table, chairs, and silver ware is there already."

"That would be great. Saves us a lot of money."

"Yes. However, the university will have more control than might be wise. What if they say they want you to serve something you can't? Or allow smoking inside?"

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Contracts are sticky. I'll have to work through their boilerplate contract and see what we will have to clarify, and what we will have to change."

"Do you think it's a good place?"

"If we set it up right, it will be. Professors year round, students most of the year. Do you plan to be there often?"

"I'm not sure I have the personality for it. Aunt Sherry needs me a few more years."

Mr. Collins laughed. "What about you Alden?"

"I'll be running Mare Valley. I'll help if I can. I'm moving my office into their home now, so there will be some shared business expenses."

Nerena brought them a pitcher of boiling water, tea bags, and tea cups. "You'll have enough to do, making the test kitchen, ordering supplies, and combining ingredients. No need for everything to be done at the restaurant."

"Can we do that at home? I thought Mrs. Yates said no."

"Test kitchen yes. For family, friends, and trusted employees. For combining ingredients, I think so. Depends on the setup. And what needs to be combined."

"That can be set up in a special made building at Aunt Sherry's." Alden stirred his tea. "We will grow some food there. Other items will have to be shipped in. There won't be much storage space at the restaurant."

"Almost none. Maybe three days worth," Nerena said.

"How many workers will we need?" Erin sipped her tea.

"If I'm the manager, I'd hire three or four part time college students to work a few hours a day. We wouldn't need much help. And someone to help bake the baked goods, if we make our own. It could take a few years to get the recipes right."

"We don't have that much time." Erin squirmed.

"You do. There are other treats we can use for now. Baked fruits will do. And those companies your aunt is checking into can help." Mr. Collins reached toward her.

"There are egg dishes, meat snacks, and vegetable dishes. We may have to appeal to the vegetarian crowd early on. Until we get the grain dishes worked out. I have to go take care of customers. See you Monday!" Nerena hurried off.

"You sure you don't want to run away?"

"I'll be here. My sister is backing you both as well. She really likes Tammy. Don't tell her though. I think you both need to work in the restaurant occasionally. Don't work poor Nerena all the time.

You'll be able to close it between sessions for a few days if you want to, since it's on campus."

"Thanks."

"We better get home. I have work to do. And Erin has to give Tammy her new phone."

"You have to teach us how to set it up."

"I will. Then, you'll teach Mark and Joe in a few years."

"They could probably teach me now. As much time as they spend with you and Weavon already."

Alden and Mr. Collins laughed.

Mr. Collins held the door open for her.

Chapter 61

Working a cell phone was really no different than emailing. It wasn't something she needed every minute of the day.

Only people like Alden and Weavon needed one all the time.

Tammy tucked it away under her pillow. At least there, she wouldn't lose it.

"What time do we leave?"

"Soon as we can be ready." Erin closed her door. "Nerena will be waiting."

"Did you want to take a class this semester?" Tammy left her door open and followed her sister down the stairs.

"I'll take one next semester, I think. There will be some night classes, if they don't run too late. Or, maybe we can take them together. I don't like the idea of you being here alone at night." Erin opened the front door.

"I'm an adult now. Plus, Alden is in and out at all hours. I'm not even sure he left last night." Tammy walked out the door.

"That's not good."

"He and Weavon are planing the driveway so we can bring our cars up here. I think they will work on it tomorrow." Tammy shut the gate behind them. "I'm used to a houseful of people, so it's nice to have him around."

"Even if he is creepy?" Erin glanced at her.

"Yeah. He won't tell me the secret you two have. I guess you like him the way Kari likes Nancy."

"Um. Not exactly. He sees me as a kid sister. One who needs a good friend right now. Even if I am older than he is."

"Well, I guess I'm a replacement sister then. He never says anything about Genell. I know he misses her."

"I know he does. What does he say?" Erin stopped at the horse gate.

Tammy leaned on the rails. "Mostly asks about Flora and listens to me talk. Sometimes, I have no idea what to say."

"How about hello." Alden walked up behind them. "Thought I'd ride with you both today, if that's okay. Easier to talk."

"You don't have to come along. You have so much to do with Mare Valley." Tammy twisted a piece of straw out of the wood fence.

Erin walked on toward where the cars were parked.

Alden leaned beside her. "Yes I do. Which is what we need to talk about. Nerena gave me an idea, and along with what you said, we have a lot to talk about. Mare Valley needs to expand its operations to be more viable, year round."

Tammy glanced up at him. He was almost uncomfortably close to her. Although, it was comforting in a way. "If you're sure."

"I stayed up late last night to get all my monthly invoices done. Let's go. Weavon can call me if he needs anything."

Tammy pulled away from the fence. "I didn't bring my phone."

"You better start carrying it. You'll need it soon."

"Should I go back?"

"No. Not today." Alden stopped and looked her in the eye. "Promise me. If you go off alone, especially in your car, you will take it with you. It's for your protection."

Tammy nodded. Alden was thinking something. Obviously. What was he not telling her? And why did it worry her?

Alden touched her chin. "Let's go. Erin is waiting on us." His voice sounded odd. Lower than usual. He refused to look at her.

She followed behind and glanced back at Flora running through the grass. A young mare lost in a sea of retirees. She needed to be with others her own age. Perhaps, they both did.

Minutes later, they caught up with Erin at the vehicles.

"You want to drive?" Erin asked.

"Um."

"You know the campus better than me."

"Okay." Tammy opened the driver's side of her vehicle. She patted the wheel and the dashboard to remind herself that driving was real. And that Choco, as well as Yapper, wouldn't meet Trisket's fate.

In a moment, she realized Alden was beside her, not Erin. Erin sat behind her. Very confusing.

"Not sure I should." Tammy opened the door. "No."

Alden laughed. "Come on. We have to talk about Flora. It'll be okay."

"And I want to see you drive without me beside you," Erin said. "You can do it."

Tammy took a deep breath and turned the ignition on. "No dogs?"

"No dogs."

She drove down the drive.

They waved to her mom on the porch.

Mark and Joe played fetch with Yapper beyond the house.

A tear squeezed out of her eye. No time for that. She wiped it dry and kept going.

"What did Nerena say?"

"Something about boarding horses for the less abled. We board them. And people come and learn to ride them and care for them. Whether it's those with Celiac who can't feed them, or those with MS who need the exercise, or the blind. Everyone needs a good friend."

"Who would have time? And where would we keep them?" Tammy braked for a red light.

"I'll have to talk to Aunt Sherry. I'm thinking of her horse fields. We wouldn't need many horses. Some of the retired ones might be able to participate. Not all of them of course. And perhaps, only with small children. Pandy and Miranda think a few of them would be good gentle riders, for the under one hundred pound set."

"We can ask her." Tammy pulled into a parking space where it would be easy to pull straight out.

"Where is the building we are looking for?"

"Across from the Clucker. I hope we don't see Olly."

The campus was crowded with people. She pushed her way through the crowd. Near the tree where she used to sit and feed the squirrel, a building loomed. She pushed the door open. "It should be in here."

Inside, voices echoed down the hall.

"First door on the right." Erin walked past Tammy and pushed it open.

Tammy followed her in.

Mr. Collins and Nerena stood near a table.

Behind them, with her hands on her hips, stood Mrs. Yates.

Tammy gulped. They hadn't even seen the place, and she was already there to inspect it. After the last visit with her, she had hoped to never see Mrs. Yates again.

Chapter 62

Dusty tables and chairs were all that stood between them and Mrs. Yates.

Mr. Collins stepped forward. "It's good to see you. The building manager called Mrs. Yates to join us. Better one visit than he two, he felt."

"I don't approve of your plan," Mrs. Yates said. "I think you'll fail. No one wants a restaurant without bread. Especially one that serves mostly coffee and tea."

"Let's leave that for the customers to decide." Erin stepped up beside Mr. Collins and Nerena.

Mrs. Yates made a rude sound. "Show them around. I'll be marking my list and we can go over it shortly. She pulled out her clipboard and peered over the top of her thin glasses at them. "Go on."

"I'll show you around." Nerena led them behind the counter. "This was a tea shop a few years ago. Then a bookstore. Maybe we can incorporate a few aspects of local artists. Not an overwhelming amount of course."

"Like what?" Tammy rubbed dust off the counter top.

Alden and Mr. Collins had stayed in the dining area to talk.

"Perhaps jewelry, books, even baskets. Local made, of course. And not too much. Don't want it to take away from the tea and coffee atmosphere." Nerena pointed out the tiny under the counter refrigerators. "There isn't much space for cold items. A few more can be added if needed."

"We could have all kinds of events. There is plenty of dining space. Study events, readings from authors, and even music on Friday nights." Tammy opened the door into the storage area. "Plenty of room in here."

"It sounds good. If you run it, you can't work that many hours by yourself." Erin looked at all the shelves. Fewer than in the pantry at Aunt Sherry's. It would be pitiful.

"I think I can. We wouldn't be open too many hours most of the time. Only during finals week, and perhaps opening week. Mostly, 10am to 4pm. And I'll have trusted employees." Nerena led them back to the counter.

"All the walls can hold shelves filled with sale items. It'll be great."

It looked great. If Mrs. Yates would approve them. "Do you have any people you can trust?"

Nerena nodded. "I have two sisters. We aren't taking any chances with them. When I don't need them here, they can help you create new dishes. And transfer supplies. If all goes well, Mrs. Yates may approve us a kitchen in another building, where we can cook and prepare food daily."

"Then, I'd have to approve your transport procedures as well." Mrs Yates snapped the clipboard down on the counter.

"I know how." Nerena rubbed dust off the counter. "This places needs a through cleaning. We could have it ready in a few days. Though inspections will make it longer."

Mrs. Yates nodded. "I'm trying to help you. I really don't think it's a good idea for people your age to start a business like this. Go live life."

Erin shook her head. "I'd never be able to work in a common work environment due to my food allergies. And neither would Tammy, or Nerena. If anyone will understand the importance of food contamination issues, we would."

Mrs. Yates raised her eyebrows and peered over her glasses. "Are you sure? Let me ask you some questions. Do you follow the guidelines for eggs and milk on the farm?"

"Farm raised is treated different, especially when from the animal to the table."

"Do you know which preservatives have to be in foods that are served in a restaurant?"

"Not really." Erin closed her eyes. "We avoid preservatives as much as possible."

"It's a wonder you've survived at all. Tell you what. I'll give the list here to Nerena. This place passes the initial tests so you may begin cleaning it up, and preparing for an intensive evaluation of the equipment. However, all food and drink products must be brought in packages from outside to prove it is made in a safe food handling environment."

"That is only temporary, right?"

Mrs. Yates nodded. "Go ahead an experiment. Make your dishes. I, or one of my associates, will teach you to make them

safely, or find a food factory where they can be made for your restaurant."

Not the words she wanted to hear. For now, she'd play along.

Where was Tammy? Normally, she would have interrupted them and argued with Mrs. Yates.

Tammy walked around the walls, touching bits of plaster that would need a painting.

Better to not interrupt her.

"My work here is done. Here Nerena." Mrs. Yates ripped the sheet off her clipboard and handed it to the waitress. She then turned and stalked out the door.

"How much is this place going to cost? Do we have to pay for all the paint and supplies?"

"No. Not all. Mr. Collins has all the paperwork on a table over there. The building manager will be in shortly to go over them with us. We should look at them first."

Erin followed Nerena over to the table Mr. Collins was at.

His smile warmed her through. "It isn't too bad. You'll need a few thousand up front."

"A few thousand?" Even a few hundred was more than Erin had ever had at one time. Except for buying her car only a few weeks before.

"Best we can do. Trust me. Any less would have to be in a location that would be 100% sure to fail. Your income here will be low at certain times of year, and much higher right before, and after, those slow times. It'll even out. Basically, you'll need a few thousand floater cash."

"Tammy studied all this more than me."

He shuffled the papers. "Basically, floater cash is my term for the money you put in at the beginning and can never use for anything else, count as income, or take out until you sale. It may seem like you are, by the books. Although, in reality, you take it out, and put it right back in inventory. So it floats along like a lazy river, occasionally bloating around a bend, and shrinking again just beyond."

"You are sure it isn't too much?" Erin shuffled in her chair.

"It isn't. Your rent here is low for two reasons. It's a college campus. And Nerena's decision to use the student work program. That means, in a sense, you will be partially federally funded."

"Does that mean a whole nother list of qualifications to meet?"

"In some cases. That's another reason sales will help. In your case, not too many requirements you won't already meet. We can cover those." Mr. Collins put the papers in a pile. "Are you satisfied with this as a restaurant? Tammy how about you?"

Tammy walked over and joined them. "It's missing something. I think we can make it work."

"It's missing tea." Alden grinned.

"It is. I think the place will be fine."

"Good. The building manager will be here any minute." Mr. Collins leaned back.

Nerena stood up. "Don't tell Mrs. Yates. I brought prepared tea. I'll get it." She walked back behind the counter and pulled out an electric kettle and tea cups.

Mrs. Yates probably knew. She had checked nigh every nook and cranny. Erin took a cup of steaming tea and tried to picture the restaurant in the coming weeks.

Chapter 63

The next several weeks passed in a blur for Tammy. Wake, research, plan, clean, and prepare for opening day. Time spent with Flora lightened each day. If it hadn't been for Flora, she'd have given up long ago.

Flora waited for her each day, almost as anxiously as Erin and Alden did. Though, her only requests were a brushing, and maybe a piece of apple. Her lips nibbled at Tammy's fingers, sucking the last apple juice off.

"You'll be ready for your first show before long. Only I'll be too old to show you in the shows I know."

Flora didn't seem to care. She bounced away and ran for the sheer joy of running.

The older horses flicked their tails at her, as if to say, "You've no where to go in such a hurry."

"Come back Flora! I've not gotten all the hay out of your tail." Tammy leaned back against the barn.

Flora tossed her tail in the air, and danced back toward her.

Laughing, Tammy brushed the hay out. "Guess it doesn't matter. You'll roll as soon as I turn my back, and it'll be as grassy as ever."

Flora tossed her head and snorted.

"Ya know, you don't act like a show horse like your mom."

"That's cause she's been around racers too much. Even if they are retired." Alden leaned across the rail.

"I don't have time to train her. She's too wild now. Why did so much have to happen?" Tammy took the brush into the barn and hung it up.

Alden was watching when she came back out. He probably wanted her to do something for Mare Valley. Or, more horrid math for then restaurant.

One of the older horses walked over to him and sniffed his hands.

"Sorry, no treats. I've been in a daze myself. Your grey hairs are showing. Think we need to fix up the barn here for winter." Alden rubbed the horse's nose.

"I'll tell mom. She'll get Mark and Joe to do it. With dad's help of course." Tammy climbed up the fence and stepped over. She didn't jump down.

"Actually, I think we are going to replace it, if we follow Nerena's plan. You'll have her horse here to take care of with yours, and a few younger retired horses. I've found a few for a reasonable price." Alden placed both of his hands on the rails and looked at her.

"Did mom say you could?"

"Sure. About half of this field belongs to you and Erin anyway."

"It does? She never told me that."

"I'm not sure she knew. Are you ready for the grand opening?"

The grand opening of Coffee, Tea, and Gluten Free. The restaurant that would be the rival of Olly and the Clucker. No contest, really. They'd win any day. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"Um. You are in your horse hair covered barn clothes. Opening is in two hours." He reached over and pulled a piece of straw out of her hair. One that had been in Flora's tail moments before.

"Guess Mrs. Yates wouldn't like it if I dripped grass and muck on the floor."

"Nor would I, Mr. Collins, Erin, Nerena, or your mom. I'll wait at your mom's while you shower and change." He held out his hand.

She ignored him, jumped down, and ran to the house. She wasn't old enough to need help to get down from a fence she had climbed that easily. Alden was nutty as ever.

Thirty minutes later she raced back down the path to catch up with Erin and ride to the grand opening. Not that it would be much of an opening. Mostly family and a few friends had been invited to a soft opening. A practice for the real day, hopefully a week away. Today would be graded harshly by Mrs. Yates.

Chapter 64

Erin tapped the roof of the car. Tammy was late as always. Aunt Sherry, Uncle Daniel, Mark, and Joe had left ten minutes ago. It would look really bad if the owners were late.

Alden walked down the lane. He stopped beside her. "I sent her to shower and change. She had Flora's straw all over her. We don't want her to smell like a barn."

"Thought you liked barn smell." Erin grumbled. They'd be late. Tammy had been used to thinking that the time to be somewhere was the time to leave, since she had hardly ever had to be anywhere more than a minute's walk away.

"I do. Other people won't appreciate it. She thinks I'm creepy again."

"What did you do?"

Alden leaned against the car and put his hand on his forehead. "She sat on the top of the rail fence while we talked. I offered her my hand to climb down. She stalked off."

"I haven't heard her mention Corey anymore. Or anyone else."

"Not even Irwan?" One eye peeked out.

Erin shook her head. So much had happened, there had been no time to think about the future, even for her.

"I'd almost rather she did prefer Corey. It'd serve me right."

"No it wouldn't. Then what would you do?"

"Guess I'd have to look elsewhere."

"I don't want to be a consolation prize."

He closed his eyes. "You won't be. Of that I promise."

"Yeah right. The only single man round here other than you is Weavon, and he's old enough to be my grandfather."

Alden lifted his eyebrow and glared at her. "Sure?"

Mr. Collins had been around a lot too. He was their business partner though. Erin squirmed. Wasn't he?

Tammy ran down the lane. "Sorry I'm late."

"Uh huh. Better get in the car. And hope there is no traffic." Erin slid behind the wheel. Her hands fluttered as she turned the key. Alden knew something he wasn't telling her. Perhaps, he had changed his mind after all. Or, would.

Chapter 65

The campus loomed ahead. Tammy fingered her seat belt. Being late wouldn't be good. Even if she didn't really care. For some reason.

Erin parked the car.

Tammy jumped out and slammed the door. She raced down the pathway to the building.

Alden and Erin walked slowly.

She pulled the door open and ran into the building. A line of people waited at the door for Coffee, Tea, and Gluten Free.

The crowd didn't part for her.

She pushed her way through.

Squeals rang out, and two girls grabbed her arms.

She blinked before she realized they were Bisera and Dara.

"I didn't know you were coming. Is Dad with you?"

"No." Bisera handed her a paper.

"It's too dark to read, let's go in the restaurant." Tammy led them in and to the small alcove set apart for the waitresses to rest in. She opened the paper. It was a letter from her dad.

"Dear Erin and Tammy,

I can't come myself, so I sent your sisters. They need to learn English. And, they may have what you have. Their mother sends her best wishes. They will be well cared for by you both and your Aunt Sherry.

May your dreams come true,

Father"

She crumpled the paper in her hands. Did her sisters know they had been dumped? Did her mom? Did their mom? She closed her eyes. This was not the night. Opening night should be fun, and busy. Not trying to figure out what her Bulgarian sisters were trying to say. Much less their future.

"Tammy?" Erin blocked the alcove door.

Oh no. Could she do for Bisera and Dara what Erin had done for her? Of course, they were fifteen and twelve, hardly infants. She handed Erin the crumpled page.

"Bisera are you ready for tonight?"

She nodded. "Help carry."

She's fifteen. No way would anyone allow her to be a waitress at fifteen.

"Tonight only. And only to Aunt Sherry's table." Erin's pale face reflected the anger she truly felt.

Tammy turned away. Her being there hadn't helped.

Bisera jumped up and raced to find the table of people she knew.

"Yes, you've that much energy." Erin folded the page and placed it in her pocket. "Nerena is waiting on us."

The tiny restaurant filled.

Mrs. Yates stood in a corner and marked notes on her clipboard.

People they didn't know came and went.

The woman from the upscale restaurant came in the open door, followed by Bain.

Tammy gasped. No one had seen him since weeks before Genell's death. To show up here was not good. Alden was somewhere nearby. He'd really be upset.

Dara led the woman and Bain to a seat in the corner.

That was Alden's table.

Tammy pulled her notepad out of her pocket and ran over anyway.

"Hello. What would you like to try?"

Bain stared at the menu. "Where are the donuts and pies. Or cakes and cupcakes? You can't have a coffee and tea shop without them."

"Maybe someday soon. I think all we have left to eat is baked apples. Our opening night was busier than anticipated."

The woman spoke up. "Mr. Collins mentioned that it was opening night for a new restaurant on campus. I thought I'd bring my son out to celebrate his release from jail. We had hoped for more of a selection."

Tammy gulped. Jail? What had Bain been in jail for?

"Mom. We are here to forget that incident."

Alden appeared beside Tammy.

"Where is Genell anyway? I can't seem to reach her by phone. The number was disconnected. I thought she'd be here." Bain pulled out a box.

"I wanted to give this to her." He opened it and a ring glistened. "Where is she?"

Tammy stepped back against Alden. Bain didn't know Genell was dead.

The woman grabbed the box. "Where did you get this?"

"What does it matter? It's for the mother of my baby."

The woman gasped.

Tammy turned and stared at Alden.

He pulled her close and held her. "Please do not ask again." Alden turned and led Tammy off.

When the reached the alcove, Tammy's legs collapsed under her. "That's what happened?"

Alden touched her shoulder. "Yes."

He turned and stepped out. "Mrs. Yates!"

Tammy sobbed. No wonder Lilly's death had been so hard on Genell. It explained everything.

A towel was handed to her.

She took it and blew her nose.

Alden sat in front of her. "I'll get Erin if you want. Or your mom. Or even Bisera."

"You never told me."

"That's my fault," Erin said from behind her. "Please forgive me. Aunt Sherry wanted you to know. I promised soon. Not this way."

Tammy sniffled. "Did Kari know?"

Erin nodded.

"Will you two be a couple now in the open?" Tammy wiped her eyes. Erin and Alden stared at each other.

"We never were a couple." Alden touched her hand. "I promise. I don't want to keep secrets from you anymore."

"Not tonight," Erin said.

Alden nodded. "One more. I promise to tell you soon. At the dinner. Okay?"

Tammy nodded.

"Everyone is gone." Erin sat beside her. "Mrs. Yates is good for something. She ran them all off. Good too, as we were almost out of everything."

"Everyone?"

"Aunt Sherry, Dara, and Bisera are helping Nerena clean up. You okay?"

"I'm still here." Mr. Collins said from behind the wall.

"I'm okay."

Relief flooded Alden's face. Perhaps he wasn't too creepy. She covered her mouth with her hand.

Alden and Mr. Collins had been cooking up something of their own.

Well let them keep their secrets.

For a while anyway.

"Go on Erin. Help Nerena. My legs are tired."

Erin glanced at her. Then she left to help the others clean up.

Laughter floated through the restaurant.

"The menu is small." Alden said.

"Well, it was supposed to be for tonight anyway. Guess I better work on it. Did you know the girls were coming back?"

He took her hands. "They were supposed to come for a week. I found that out when I left the house today. Erin had called to say Aunt Sherry was going to pick them up at the airport."

"With four of us there now, will you keep your office there?"

He grinned and leaned back. "If you'll have me. At least you'll have two sisters to teach how to train show horses."

"Guess I will. Flora can begin training tomorrow. And Bisera can take my old show ring spot." She smiled.

Chapter 66

It was move in day for Bisera and Dara. Both girls would have upstairs rooms across from the shrine room. That someday might not be a shrine. Not soon though. Two more sisters to raise. Just when Erin thought she might be ready to raise a child of her own. It wasn't Bisera and Dara's fault.

Where were Bisera and Dara after all? Not to mention Tammy.

She picked up her cell phone and dialed Tammy's number. On the third ring, she answered. "Sorry, we are training Flora."

The horse show mess. At least it would keep the sisters busy. And out of trouble.

"Weavon should be here with the cart any minute."

"He's here. He's going to give us a ride to Aunt Sherry's in a minute and pick up Dara an Bisera's clothes."

"Okay. I'll be waiting."

"What's wrong?" Alden stuck his head out the door of his office room.

"They are more worried about a horse show six months from now, than moving into their new home."

He laughed. "That's actually good. They are learning English. Having something to look forward to will help them. Being dumped isn't easy on anyone."

"I need them here, so I can take a batch of cakes for Nerena to try, and be back before the dinner tonight. She only has a short break."

"So go. I'll be here. Weavon will help. And Tammy will be here."

"That's not right." Erin wanted to go and leave them to work it out on their own. It felt wrong.

Alden touched her elbow. "Go. It's not like they arrived on the plane today. They've been here a week, and even picked out the colors for their rooms."

She walked to the kitchen. "Your sure?"

He nodded.

She returned with a covered cake plate. "Have you told her?"

Alden rested his hand on the door. "I promised I would tell her at the dinner tonight. I will keep that promise."

He would. Erin knew he would. Her hand trembled. The cakes slipped.

Alden grabbed them before they hit the floor. "Erin, trust me. It's going to be okay."

"Unless you know something I don't."

He turned to the office and back to her. "All I can say is, it will be okay."

She had always trusted him before. She had to now.

"Go before the girls see you crying."

She hurried out of the house.

At the restaurant, even Nerena had something bothering her.

"I've barely time to speak. Though tell Tammy, Zorina joined us." Nerena took the cakes and rushed back behind the counter to the coffee pots and piles of baked goods.

Erin took a deep breath and left the restaurant. The place she had worked so hard to create. The one place she really didn't want to be. Neither did Tammy, it seemed. Of course, if Tammy appreciated Alden's gesture, she would never have to spend time there. He'd see to that.

Leaving Erin alone with their two half-grown sisters to raise. She sniffled as she started the car.

Later that evening, she had to choose between which outfits to wear to the tiny dinner party in her own kitchen. One all for the sister she had unselfishly raised.

Nerena had arrived and shooed her out of the kitchen, and even blocked the door.

Should she wear the red or the blue? Did it even matter? Tonight was Tammy's night. Even if she didn't know it. She touched a black sweater. With navy pants, it'd be perfect.

There was a knock at the door.

It had to be Bisera or Dara. "Tammy is next door."

"It's Aunt Sherry. I want to see you."

"Come on in."

Holding back the tears would be even more difficult now. Aunt Sherry knew the whole sordid story from the last ten years. Ten years she had loved Alden. And he hadn't loved her one day. He only had eyes for Tammy for the last five years.

Aunt Sherry walked into the room with a lovely pale yellow outfit. "I thought this would be perfect. Don't you?"

She blinked. "For Tammy."

"For you." Aunt Sherry sat on the bed. "It's time you had a new outfit. I picked it out for you."

"Tonight is Tammy's night."

Aunt Sherry waved her hand. "I'm not worried about her. I'm worried about you. If she and Alden decide to marry, they may decide to leave and take your sisters with them. That is, of course, if Mr. Collins determines this whole thing your father did is legal."

"They'd leave me all alone." That would be even worse than raising more sisters.

Aunt Sherry put her hand on Erin's knee. "That all alone is what I am worried about. Come on. Dress up. Look the part."

"I don't want to take her happiness from her, if Alden is what she wants."

"She doesn't know what she wants. Other than to not see her big sister cry. Please. Dress up. Do it for me. Or Grandma Jensen. Or Kari and Nancy. They want to see pictures of tonight. With smiles. This is the celebration dinner for one week of business. You should be proud."

Erin nodded. "I am. Though Nerena has done all the work."

"I don't think she minds. I'll see you downstairs."

Erin slipped into the soft new outfit. She did need a few new outfits. Her old ones were shrinking, and losing color. And the outfit she had worn opening night wasn't really the type of outfit that would attract a man she would trust. This was though. Perhaps, as owner, she could visit her restaurant, sip tea, and meet someone nice that way. Someday.

She walked down the stairs.

The kitchen door was open.

Nerena had a screen up blocking the cooking area from the table.

She sat down beside Aunt Sherry.

"Bisera and Dara will sit away down there. I think they were trying to convince Tammy to wear ribbons in her hair. Will our wild filly allow herself to be bedecked in color?"

"A year ago? Absolutely not. Those girls are good for her though." Erin pushed the place settings back a little.

Alden walked in the door with Mr. Collins right behind him. Both dressed up more than she had ever seen them. Now, her business partner would see her pain, as well as her family.

"Come and sit," Aunt Sherry said.

Alden nodded and gulped. He sat over one seat so Tammy could be in front of him.

Mr. Collins sat directly in front of her.

Nerena went to the door and yelled, "Dinner!"

Tammy galloped down the stairs and ran in the door followed by Bisera and Dara. She wore a beautiful aqua outfit. The younger sisters were dressed plainly in grey, with purple ribbons in their hair.

Nerena passed out a wonderful dinner in phases.

The talk was average, though Alden was noticeably nervous. His hand kept going to his side. And he glanced at Mr. Collins frequently. Surely, he hadn't decided to ask Mr. Collins to marry them on the spot.

She glared at Alden.

He held up his index finger.

Nerena took the meal plates away. "Dessert will be a moment more. Bisera, Dara, can you help please?"

Bisera and Dara walked behind the screen.

Alden reached for Tammy's hand. "I promised. No more secrets. Now, or ever." He handed her a box.

Tammy stared at him. She opened the box and glanced at the silver ring.

"I know you won't wear it while working with the horses."

Tammy's mouth moved. No words came out. She gulped and clutched the ring in its box to her chest.

No response. Though her face seemed more joyous than upset. Not angry as it might have been a year ago.

That Mr. Collins should have to watch this was upsetting. She turned to him. Yes, his face was red.

He reached for her hand. "Erin, I hope you will see me as an equal partner, as well as a business partner."

Mr. Collins looked into her eyes as Alden still looked at Tammy. He held out a tiny box to her as well.

She opened it to a ring that matched the necklace in the safe. The one she had given to Aunt Sherry after cleaning out the attic that day.

Someone giggled behind the screen.

Nerena stepped out. "Tea anyone? Cakes?"

Bisera and Dara followed with trays of gluten free cakes and brownies.

Grandma Jensen's rocker rocked much as if she sat there knitting, and nodding her head at the goings on in her home.

A new beginning for them all.

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Thanks!

Abby Brown

About the Author

Abby Brown began reading at far too young an age. Her preferred reading material was nonfiction, with biographies and science being at the forefront of her library excursions.

Her ability to memorize and use all the grammar rules in school years led to working in the school library while classmates caught up. All of those rules, and diagramming sentences was easy and relaxing. For many years. All forgotten now. Except the joyful memories of preparing the library for others to use.

As an adult, gardening, and preparing the garden bounty, was her way to relax. To think. To make (tasty) order out chaos. Even that is gone now. May you enjoy the recipes she has gathered over the decades.

Other Books by Abby Brown

Kin Strife

Recording the village elder's life stories should be routine. Always on the outside of village life, looking in. Terra's rocked babies, cooked meals, written memories.

Nothing more.

Until now.

Saving stories in a village of people lost between cultures interrupts her search for belonging. Their fragmented stream of life threatens all Terra knows of her own past, and future. She must tame the stream back into its banks to create a home she never dreamed existed.

NonFiction

Logging My Life

Logging your life takes time, energy, and effort. Make it easy with this workbook prepared to help you through the process.

Print and use the pages as is, or create your own based on your individual needs. Financial and health care pages will assist you through the complicated financial and medical system.

This workbook can be used to create a scrapbook of everything you have done, and all the information you might need. It will help you track your budget through the years. As well as employers, publications, and personal achievements. There are pages travel preparation, personal and family events, and more.

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